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Strategizing aid: US–China food aid relations to North Korea in the 1990s

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Abstract

This study sets out to analyze strategic relations of two major donors – the United States and China – in delivering food aid to North Korea in the 1990s. By reviewing the historical evolution of US–China strategic relations in line with food aid and adopting a game model to verify historical findings, it addresses two significant observations. First, the North Korean food aid dynamics were constructed and crystallized by donors' strategic interactions, rather than humanitarian intention to save the famine-stricken North Korea. Both donors first took into account strategic interests in aid dynamics, and then utilized food aid as a strategic instrument for their own purposes. Second, any multilateral cooperation for delivering food aid to North Korea dooms to failure, despite the potential of aid coordination among donor states. Donors' competition for the primacy in the region of Northeast Asia hampered policy coordination for institutionalizing aid networks. It is concluded that the two donors were bound to strategize food aid as a

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logical outgrowth of their own interests in the wake of North Korea's humanitarian disasters.

1 Introduction

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) has been often catapulted into the public as the most isolated, unpredictable, and paranoid regime on earth. Not surprisingly, the North Korean regime has been called mad, rogue, and even, by the Wall Street Journal, the equivalent of 'unreformed serial killer' in the sense of Pyongyang's hard-line foreign policies generating relentless threats and insecurity in Northeast Asia. Given that North Korea has been historically at loggerheads with the United States for more than five decades, its prevailing perception has long remained in a negative image of the irrational offensive. This resulted in the lack of middle grounds where the international community might seek to build communication channels with the DPRK.

However, international engagement in North Korea has been to some extent made possible in the wake of the great famine that began to prevail in the mid-1990s (Natsios, 2001; Smith, 2005). The DPRK's unexpected appeal for emergency relief assistances allowed a few humanitarian international agencies to carry out humanitarian aid projects in its hermit kingdom. In so doing, Pyongyang stood at a mixed frontline of foreign relations between military confrontation and humanitarian calls for food aid. It is a historical crossroads where the North Korean regime might collapse under the devastating fallouts of economic mismanagements or muddle through by complying with international intervention. Yet it is also a decisive juncture with which donor states, together with international relief organizations, might be able to socialize an intractable troublemaker into the international community. North Korean aid relations, thus, lie in the intersection of humanitarianism and strategic realism.

Humanitarian aid is, by definition, material or logistical assistance for humanitarian purposes, which are aimed at saving lives, alleviating suffering, and maintaining human dignity (Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International, 2008). It can be distinguished from development aid, which seeks to address and reform the underlying

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socioeconomic factors leading to a crisis or emergency. Nevertheless, the most popular form of humanitarian aid, in fact, rests on development aid in order to promote a long-term development of recipient countries, rather than serve as an immediate remedy for emergency relief (Macrae, 2001; Easterly, 2006). To this end, the aid industry, technically, emphasizes recipients' compliance with conditionality, which contributes to enhancing aid effectiveness and minimizing the fungibility of aid (Killick, 1998, pp. 19–52; Riddell, 2007, pp. 231–252). In many cases, the practical mode of humanitarian aid converges into development-related aid programs equipped with policy conditionality for structural adjustment.

However, this aid dynamics become deformed or transformed when it plugs into the North Korean situation where aid relations are bound up with power struggles among donors – mainly, the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) and the United States – or between donors and North Korea. Some notable distinctions of food aid relations around the North Korean famine are detected along the two fronts of aid dynamics: (i) conditionality and (ii) donor-recipient discords.

The first puzzle relates to an observation that the United States and China did not take any serious measures in terms of aid conditionality, even supposing Pyongyang's nuclear threats to regional security and its totalitarian rule in domestic politics undermined not only the justification of humanitarian aid but also aid effectiveness. Donor states intended to ward off their direct involvements in demanding serious conditions for aid delivery, which should have been attached to food aid for the despotic DPRK regime. In the later 1990s, the Clinton administration, even, tried to lift America's longstanding economic sanctions against North Korea in the face of US Congress's strong opposition. Why were the United States and China reluctant to call for conditionality in any serious way? Did they not ever feel donor fatigue? Does the lack of conditionality imply the failure of donors' food aid policies?

The second distinction takes place in the dual structure of aid-related conflicts: not only between donors and North Korea, but also between donors *themselves.* Without serious considerations of acute tensions inside the donor community, recent scholarly works on the humanitarian aid to North Korea have mostly concentrated on donor–recipient frictions – particularly concerning the monitoring deficit, aid diversion, and diminishing effectiveness – under the premise that the main sources of delivery problem lied in Pyongyang's severe restrictions on aid

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workers' movement and access (Natsios, 2001; Smith, 2005; Haggard and Noland, 2007). On the contrary, a counterfactual reflection, by inviting donors' power relations into the aid equation on North Korea, would address donor–donor conflicts as another source of diverting food aid in North Korea. For the most part, discords between Washington and Beijing, anchored in the post-Cold War mechanism of US–China rivalry, lead to a strategic development of their aid relations, which is entrenched in their own strategic interests and detached from humanitarian principles (Friedberg, 1993/1994). The recipient, whose objective is to elicit more aid from each donor, tends to drive a wedge between donors' different strategic positions by pitting one side against another. By referring to strategic conflicts between the United States and China, this study discusses how humanitarianism in food aid had been discolored by donors' strategic concerns, together with the recipient's deliberate maneuvers. Accordingly, it advances donors' strategic relations as an explanatory variable for uncovering variations of aid relations in North Korea.

In this regard, this study takes on a comparative historical analysis of strategic embeddedness underlying food aid policies of the United States and China in the 1990s, from the collapse of the Cold War to the close of the Clinton administration.[1] It is undertaken under a working

1 Major food aid donors in this study are confined to the United States and China only, for enhancing the analytical parsimony that the limited number of donors helps demonstrating strategic tensions between donor states in a more systematic and effective fashion. Although there exist other donors such as South Korea, Japan, and international relief organizations, they had mostly provided food aid in line with US aid policy and explicitly or implicitly under the coordination with the United States. Only China behaved independently of the United States as being an outlier acting on the basis of its own interests. Therefore, donor variables converge into such two states. The research period is taken through the 1990s, ranging from the collapse of the Cold War to the end of the Clinton administration. The easing of the Cold War is seen as a crucial watershed where global order was reformulated under US unilateral primacy and North Korea lost its former allies who had provided economic and military assistance during the Cold War. Meanwhile, after coming into power in 2001, the new president Bush ordered the reconsideration of US policy concerning North Korea from all sides. The Bush administration's return to a hostile stance toward North Korea means that US food aid policy during the Clinton administration in the 1990s lost its policy consistency for the economic and humanitarian inducement of North Korea. It, thus, is of less meaning to extend the time period to the Bush administration for the reason that an extended time frame would hamper the direction of research to be unswerving when Washington's abandoning of food aid policy is compared to China's consistent policy of food aid in the 2000s. In short, any scholarly attempt to compare two donors in the 2000s would not be a difficult task; rather, such a comparison is not necessarily efficient due to the clear-cut distinctions of their food aid policies.

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proposition that the two donor states *strategized* food aid as a tactical apparatus aiming at their own national interests in both North Korea and East Asia. In so doing, the rest of this paper proceeds in four steps. First, it begins by exploring famine in North Korea and its impact on Pyongyang's foreign policy as historical backgrounds of food aid relations. Second, it historically tracks how food aid policies of the two donors have developed in association with their own strategic interests. Third, it compares historical findings by assessing them with a two-by-two food aid game, thereby verifying the notion that both donors' decision on aid provision is an optimal choice for their strategic concerns. Finally, it proposes that there are several reasons why donors, despite some tangible benefits from collaboration, are reluctant to coordinate with each other in delivering food aid to North Korea.

2 North Korea at the crossroads: famine, regime survival, and foreign relations

The social origins of economic collapse and chronic food shortages in North Korea can be sensed by the multiple dimensions, interlinked between endogenous limitations of the Communist command planning and other exogenous factors (Eberstadt, 1999, pp. 45–69). As for internal impediments, the DPRK's excessive defense spending (around 25% of GDP), with little attention to agriculture and light industry, resulted in economic imbalance. Such an economic mismanagement, nevertheless, was ideologically justified under the nationalistic slogan of 'our own style of socialism' and the military-first policy (Kim, 2000, pp. 452–456). In terms of external factors, the two major allies – Russia and China – since the late 1980s, had curtailed export subsidies, food aid, fertilizers, and crude oil, and demanded hard currencies in lieu of barter in their trades with North Korea. Particularly, China's official embargo of food exports in October 1994 dealt the North Korean economy a fatal blow. Prodded by economic interests, they quickly established trade and diplomatic relationships with South Korea, thereby further isolating North Korea politically and economically. The US economic sanction was another fatal source to exacerbate the North's economy and make it vulnerable to external aids. The most immediate cause of famine was the reiteration of massive floods and droughts since 1995, which ultimately led the post-Kim Il Sung DPRK to appeal to the

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international relief organizations, particularly the World Food Program (WFP) and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) (FAO/WFP, 1996; Woo-Cumings, 2002). The social fallout of natural disasters paralyzed the system of food production and distribution that had been the most essential parts of the Communist economy.

The severity of famine drove the closed totalitarian regime into the apocalypse of the total crisis. Estimates of the death toll ranged from hundreds of thousands to several million depending on sources of estimates. By early 1999, Hwang (1999), North Korea's highest-ranking defector, publicly estimated that 3 million persons or perhaps even more had already perished from hunger. According to the estimation of the Centre for Refugee and Disaster Studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, the death rate during the great famine (1995–98) skyrocketed up to 42.8%, eight times of that (5.5%) in 1993, and the ratio of government rationing had dramatically declined to the extent that more than 40% of households were destined to forage or barter for food (Robinson *et al.*, 2001). The great famine in North Korea also triggered an exodus of refugees, which was perceived as troublesome interstate issues by neighboring countries, particularly China. Amnesty International (2001, p. 148) reports that the Chinese government forcibly repatriated about 5,000 North Koreans across the Yalu river in June 2000 alone. Such disastrous results would make the North Korean regime losing ground for legitimate power of social control.

Under these circumstances, the DPRK regime found itself in a delicate situation where it should solve two problems all at once: regime maintenance and economic survival. Kim Jong Il deliberately adopted a double-track policy: keeping domestic politics intact to the maximum and opening the doors to the minimum when appealing for emergency food aid to the international community. In the domain of economic survival, although slow in pace and limited in scope, North Korea underwent some incremental openings and reforms.[2] However, Pyongyang's policymakers repeatedly warned that any further efforts for economic

2 In the post-Cold War era, a few evidences, even if most cases turned out to end in failure, can be taken as examples of economic reforms, such as the Najin-Sŏnbong Foreign Economic and Trade Zone, business laws for foreign investors, the 'Three Firsts' of agriculture, light industry, and foreign trade first policy, the decentralization of responsibility to provinces for food rations, courses in capitalist business practices taught by foreigners which were offered at Kim Il Sung University, and the KEDO nuclear project zone.

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reforms should be perceived as a serious challenge to political legitimacy of the socialist government. As a result, economic openings to the outer world and reformative trials for economic survival were pursued *within* the regime's capability to control economic modification (Smith, 2005, pp. 136–137). With regard to regime maintenance, the Kim Jong Il regime employed intensive propaganda campaigns to base his authority on his father's legacy, took personal credit for North Korea's successes, and kept the populace isolated from foreign influences (Kim, 2000, pp. 149–153). Propaganda via the official news agency boasted the DPRK as the utopian communist land and indoctrinated the systemic superiority of the North Korean society. In the Party's propaganda, Kim Jong Il admitted that North Korea was suffering from a global food shortage and claimed that if North Korean conditions had been worse than other nations, this would have been only because of recent natural disasters and the stifling effect of the American economic embargo, rather than his economic mismanagement (Kim, 2000, pp. 1–7).

Economic deterioration and the loss of old allies in the post-Cold War era led Pyongyang to change its national goal from hegemonic unification to 'basic survival'. It is in this context that in August 1995, the DPRK, for the first time in the North Korean history, addressed its direct appeal for food aid to the outer world, which would be the last resort for Pyongyang to take in the hope of decelerating the rampant famine. While allowing international relief agencies to be stationed in local provinces, the DPRK's authorities regulated their aid activities and prevented the North Korean people from communicating with them. Donors' concerns with this intervention called into question the appropriation of food aid by the military and less deserving groups such as party elites. Accordingly, the donor community became restive because Pyongyang did not carry out any meaningful economic reforms or reciprocal concessions to humanitarian aid (Haggard and Noland, 2007, pp. 79–83). Nevertheless, as Figs 1 and 2 demonstrate, the annual sum of food aid delivered by major donors has been increasing to the extent that international relief food aid amounted to almost one-third of the total food supply in 2000.

At the heart of the DPRK's survival diplomacy in the 1990s was a tactical bargaining strategy equipped with nuclear and missile proliferation. By undertaking acts of belligerence aimed to threaten *status quo* in Northeast Asia, Pyongyang attempted to obtain strategic leverages for

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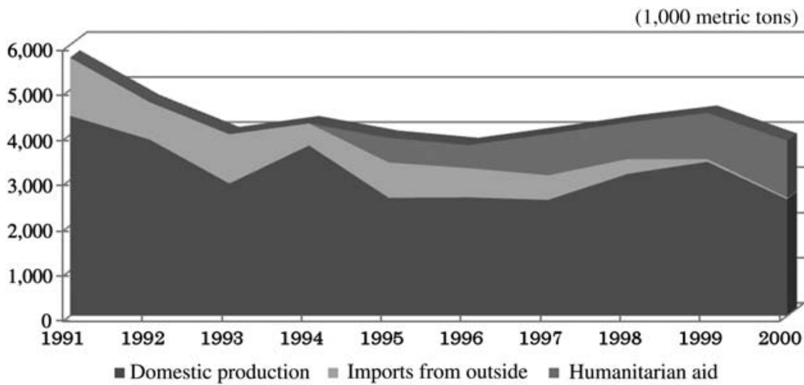

Figure 1 Sources of food supply, 1990–2000. *Source*: International Food Aid Information System (2005).

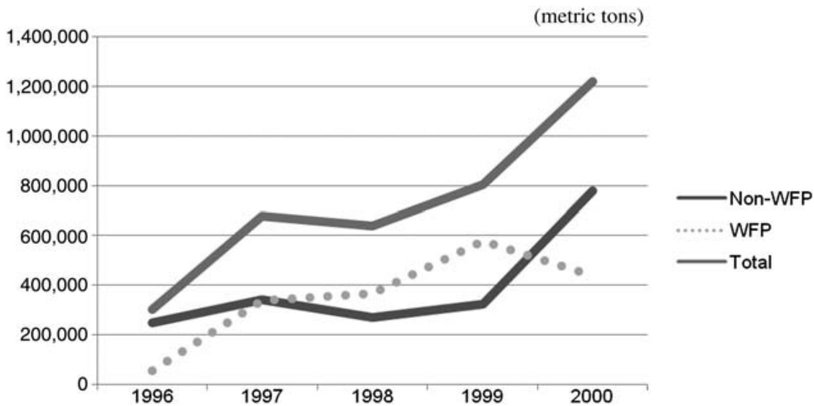

Figure 2 WFP and Non-WFP food aid deliveries to North Korea, 1996–2000. *Source:* WFP INTERFAIS Database.

economic rewards for the North's freeze on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (Sigal, 1998; Kang, 2003). This negotiation behavior was demonstrated not only in the process of the 1994 Agreed Framework, where, by using the nuclear threats, North Korea gained the light water reactor deal from Washington, but also in the process of the 1997 Four-Party Talks, where, by using the long-range missile card, it persisted the alleviation of economic embargo and increase in the amount of food aid. Such a bargaining tactic for its regime survival became much more sophisticated by bringing the rising Sino-American rivalry relations in the post-Cold War period back to its traditional

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foreign policy legacy: ‘playing one side off against the other’. Such a *driving-a-wedge* strategy took advantage of effectiveness in treating two counterparts respectively and seducing the one into coming to the negotiation table with a more affirmative attitude for fear that it be sidelined (Mansourov, 1999, p. 253). In fact, a North Korean official directly gave a suggestion to a group of Americans from the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations who were visiting Pyongyang in 1995: ‘if you need to balance China’s growing power, you should establish relations with us’ (Chanda, 1995, p. 17). It sounds as though North Korea, after playing the nuclear card to gain economic aid from Washington, then flashed the China card in the hope of further economic and diplomatic gains.

All in all, the North’s survival diplomacy is characterized by one common *modus operandi*: to secure regime survival through the mobilization of possible instruments contributing to obtaining more economic and diplomatic concessions from all parties concerned. Pyongyang’s direct appeals for food aid would be also understood as one of survival diplomacy, but its resulting aid dynamics, in turn, would leave a leeway for donor states to engage North Korea with ‘food diplomacy’ advancing famine as an opportunity to elicit political concessions from the DPRK (Noland *et al*., 1998, pp. 9–12).

3 America’s food aid policy

The North Korean famine, generating the starvation, refugee exodus, and societal instability, was put to the fore as a new source of regional conflicts in Northeast Asia. In response to this human calamity in a despotic hermit kingdom, the United States took on humanitarian inducements such as emergency food supply, rather than lifting economic sanctions blighting the Kim Jong Il regime.[3] However, a deeper

3 Historically, the United States had firmly maintained economic sanctions against North Korea by way of the ‘Trading With the Enemy Act’ since November 1950 when Chinese military troops entered the Peninsular in support of North Korean forces during the Korean War. Afterwards, Washington’s perception of North Korea as a hostile enemy during the Cold War era expanded the range of economic sanctions from commercial trade to foreign aid and financial transaction on the basis of diverse national laws: the ‘Foreign Assistance Act’, the ‘Export Control Act’, the ‘Foreign Assets Control Regulations’, and the ‘Arms Export Control Act’. The reconsideration of economic sanctions against North Korea was embarked on by the Clinton administration in a bid to appease Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons development in the early stage of 1990s. Refer to O’Hanlon and Mochizuki (2003, pp. 87–88).

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examination of US food aid policy reveals that its underlying rationale was embedded in US strategic concerns in maintaining regional stability in the face of China's influence in the post-Cold War East Asia. The development of US food aid policy in the 1990s can be bracketed along two historical break-through points: the North Korean Food Crisis and the Four-Party Talks.

3.1 The North Korean food crisis

In response to the North Korean food crisis, the Clinton administration labeled humanitarian food assistance as an alternative to engage the DPRK and undertook administrative processes for releasing food aid to the famine-ravaged North Korea. In early 1996, the US Department of State declared that Washington would kick off food supply for North Korea via indirect roots of the international relief organizations and international nongovernmental agencies. The Treasury Department partially relieved some provisions of the Foreign Assets Control Regulations in order to facilitate food aid delivery to North Korea. In addition, the Department of Commerce took steps to allow US-based firms or humanitarian organizations to provide food supply for North Korea without any prior approval of the US government (Office of the Spokesman, 1999). In fact, Clinton administration's political measures implied the *de facto* removal of an economic ban on humanitarian assistance under the condition that food aid is not related to other economic activities such as trade, financial transaction, and investment. The amount of American contributions to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in 1998 and 1999 was approximately over 25% of the total food supply that UNOCHA spearheaded for North Korea (UNOCHA, 2000). The amount of US food aid, as Table 1 demonstrates, had been increasingly growing so as to reach over 0.6 million metric tons of cereals and non-cereals in 1998. As a result, the DPRK was the third largest US aid recipient in Asia, receiving over 50 million dollars after 1996.

Washington's engagement with famine in North Korea presents two significant reflections on US strategic interests in food aid policy. First, US food aid can be interpreted as an additional assurance instrument to

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Table 1 US food aid to the DPRK, 1995–2000

		1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Cereals	Blended foods	–	10,518	18,546	49,602	24,799	–
	Coarse grains	–	67,892	113,253	145,144	180,000	–
	Milled paddy rice	9,185	13,197	16,000	19,000	27,498	–
	Wheat and wheat flour	–	–	–	399,753	229,226	140,000
Non-cereals	Skim milks	–	–	–	298	5,008	4,819
	Vegetable oils	–	–	–	–	10,000	9,978
	Other foods	–	–	–	–	–	20,000
Total		9,185	91,607	147,799	613,797	476,531	174,797

Source: FAOSTAT Database.

induce North Korea to adhere to the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework.[4] Alongside the easing of economic sanctions and the launch of the KEDO program, the promise of emergency relief assistance further encouraged Pyongyang to remain in the Agreed Framework. The strategic utility of humanitarian aid, which was expected to serve Washington's primary concerns with security management in this region, eventually sidelined aid conditionality that would have been attached to food aid for more effective distribution.

Second, humanitarian aspects of food aid enabled the Clinton administration to dodge or slow down the domestic hawkish criticisms to the easing of economic sanctions against North Korea. The Republican Party strongly blamed the Clinton government for its moderate stance toward Pyongyang, in the sense that food aid would be hoarded for military provisions, thereby prolonging the authoritarian regime without

4 Relations between the United States and North Korea worsened in the early 1990s when North Korea expanded its nuclear program and the United States considered bombing the suspected weapons development facilities. In 1994, after former president Jimmy Carter sat down with North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, the two sides eventually negotiated their way back from the brink of war. The result of the negotiation was the Agreed Framework stipulating that North Korea freeze its nuclear program in exchange for shipments of heavy fuel oil from the United States and two light-water reactors which would be built by an international consortium – Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) – funded by Japan and South Korea. Given that the United States and North Korea, as part of the agreement, pledged to move toward full normalization of relations, the 1994 Agreed Framework implies an evidence of the US shift from the hostile confrontation with the previous Cold War lenses to the post-Cold War strategy of 'engagement and enlargement'.

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reciprocal concessions from Pyongyang (Lilley, 1996). However, if food aid were verified as humanitarian relief assistance, government itself could have rights to decide on food assistance to a certain country, even an enemy facing a humanitarian crisis, without congressional approval. Therefore, the Clinton administration, by stressing food aid to North Korea as humanitarian emergency relief, succeeded in providing food aid in the form of PL 480 Title II Emergency Food Aid and, at the same time, mitigated the Republican grievances in Congress. It is also for the same reason that US food aid had been primarily delivered through the multilateral root of international organizations – particularly, WFP and FAO – and international NGOs, rather than a direct supply to North Korea (US General Accounting Office, 2000, pp. 1–2).

3.2 The Four-Party Talks

Afterwards, US food diplomacy was further evolved as a sophisticated policy aimed to bring North Korea to a multilateral negotiation table set for discussing a peaceful settlement of the North's nuclear problems. On 16 April 1996, South Korean President Kim Young Sam and US President William Clinton proclaimed the Four-Party Peace Talks, with the two Koreas, the United States, and China. This new phase in dealing with the North Korean problem sought to build on the 1994 Agreed Framework and aimed to achieve a 'soft landing' and a gradual reunification process by transforming the military confrontation into peaceful coexistence in the Korean Peninsula (Harrison, 1997).

From the beginning, however, this multilateral meeting was protracted due to Pyongyang's sudden request of preliminary conditions for the Four-Party Talks (Park and Park, 1999, pp. 23–26). As preceding conditions, North Korea demanded a package of large-scale food aid (around 1.2 million tons annually), the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea, and the conclusion of a peace pact between the DPRK and the United States. In response to the North's demands, both Washington and Seoul, at the second preparatory meeting in September 1997, suggested 100,000 metric tons of grain in return for Pyongyang's participation in the Talks. Immediately, the North Korean Central News Agency rebuked the United States for manipulating humanitarian aid as a political weapon for its own strategic objectives. In response to that, Rubin and Foley (1997) in the Office of the Spokesman of the US State

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Department emphasized the humanitarianism of US food aid by affirming that 'we do not use food as a political weapon; American food aid to North Korea and four-party talks are independent of each other.' Likewise, Charles Kartman (1998), US Special Envoy for the Korean Peace Process, confirmed, 'US food aid policy has been, and continues to be, not to link this assistance to our broader political concerns.'

It has been widely accepted that the United States provided food aid in exchange for North Korea's participation in the first convention of the Four-Party Talks on 9 December 1997, albeit the Clinton government's repeated denial of the close connectedness between the Talks and US food aid (Noland, 2000, p. 186). In fact, Washington conveyed two further political inducements for this end. First, Washington kept enticing Pyongyang to get in on the Talks not only by granting humanitarian assistance worth about 5 million dollars by way of the UNICEF, but also by dispatching American representatives to Pyongyang in order to estimate how much food aid Pyongyang would require further. Second, Washington unofficially promised Pyongyang to provide 1 million tons of additional grain through the WFP. In the end, North Korea showed up at the Four-Party Talks, which verifies that emergency large-scale aid could be a useful means for acquiring political capital with which to begin a variety of diplomatic negotiations (Relief and Rehabilitation Network, 1999). Both US and DPRK's interests turned out to be converging on 'food aid for talks' in that Pyongyang could secure food supply necessary for regime stability on the one hand, and Washington could maintain regional stability by luring North Korea into the multilateral forum with the bait of food aid, on the other.

3.3 American strategic interest

Exploring the historical evolution of US food aid policy in the 1990s cannot be completed without taking US strategic interests embedded in food diplomacy into deep consideration. The North Korean famine, alongside its nuclear threats, was perceived by Washington as a new threat arising from a variety of appalling scenarios: a sudden collapse of the North Korean economy; a massive flow of refugees; financial bailout to recover North Korea; or even its sudden invasion of South Korea (Council on Foreign Relations, 1998, pp. 10–11). Responsive actions taken by the United States in the 1990s signified that Washington did

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not favor the sudden collapse of North Korea, which would destabilize security equilibrium in East Asia. Given that the maintenance of *status quo* on the Korean Peninsula was Washington's overriding concerns in this region, US food aid played a critical role as a strategic instrument in retarding the North's sudden collapse and enticing Pyongyang into the multilateral dialogue for discussing the solution of nuclear programs.

From a global strategic viewpoint, the North Korean problem was not the most urgent task requiring Washington's constant high-level attention. Rather, how to redefine the strategic relationship with China in the post-Cold War era was on the top of the list (Kissinger, 2002). In projecting the potential of China's economic and military expansion into the future, many scholars foresee China as the rising challenger to America's global position (Nye, 1995; Christensen, 1999). Accordingly, China's strategic maneuvers in the wake of the North Korean food crisis were interpreted inevitably by the high-politics prism of US–China rivalry. While China's food aid policy toward North Korea, akin to American policy, was mainly designed to maintain regime stability in North Korea, China's direct engagement with North Korea via bilateral channels of food aid delivery would be sensed by Washington as Beijing's deliberate efforts to expand the sphere of influence in its former Communist ally. Namely, China's bilateral food diplomacy would cut in half the value of US food aid due to its indirect distribution through the multilateral relief organizations. It is worth noting that in April 1999, the Clinton administration eventually announced it would take a modest step to launch US government-sponsored *bilateral* food assistance.[5] This US policy transition from multilateral to bilateral patterns could be considered Washington's receptive adaptations to balance China's direct food supply. In short, American insistence on humanitarian engagement in North Korea, despite its criticism against Pyongyang's development of nuclear programs, implies that Washington attempted to avoid at least the worst scenario: Pyongyang's jumping in the sphere of China's influence, thereby destabilizing regional order in East Asia.

5 In April 1999, the US government agreed to its first direct assistance to North Korea: 600,000 metric tons of food, as well as a project coordinated with several US NGOs that would introduce new potato varieties to North Korean farms. According to a report of the US General Accounting Office (2000), this breaking offer was done in exchange for North Korea's agreement to provide the United States access to inspect a suspected underground nuclear facility at Kumchang-ni in March 1999.

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4 China's food aid policy

The Sino-North Korean relationship in the post-Cold War years has evolved in line with its transformation from party-to-party to state-to-state relations, rooted in China's strategic calculation on the existential values of North Korea, rather than historical, ideological ties with the North (Scalapino, 2001, pp. 110–111). Within this realist framework, Beijing attempted to utilize food aid as a strategic apparatus to enhance its influences on the DPRK. China's food diplomacy was, therefore, based upon the reconfiguration of its post-Cold War strategic interest in the Korean Peninsula and East Asia *en bloc*.

4.1 South Korea–China diplomatic normalization

The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 stimulated China to find a way of securing its strategic interests in a new US-dominated international system. The economic development led by the reformists since 1978 remained retarded due to US-initiated economic sanctions against China's human rights abuses during the Tiananmen bloodshed in June 1989. Under these circumstances, South Korea became attractive to Beijing as a new counterpart for economic cooperation. With the diplomatic normalization with South Korea in August 1992, the PRC intended to circumvent the US-led economic embargo through various alternative channels for trade (Liu, 1993, p. 1091). Furthermore, the Sino-South Korean normalization resulted in China's success in the breakdown of diplomatic relations between Taiwan and South Korea, which could facilitate China's political desire, 'one nation, two systems' (Chang, 1992, p. 124).

However, China's diplomatic normalization with South Korea brought about Pyongyang's strong denunciation of China, charging that Beijing had betrayed both North Korea and socialism (Korean Central News Agency, 27 September 1992). Responding to strains in Pyongyang–Beijing relations, China endeavored to reassure Pyongyang of Beijing's willingness to support the North's regime with two enticements for the recovery of their traditional alliance. The first signal came from China's commitment to the reciprocal exchange of high-level military executives between two countries more often than before the Sino-South Korean normalization (Shin, 1997, pp. 48–50; Kim, 1998, p. 108). Right after concluding the normalization, the Chinese Foreign Minister Qian

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Qichen announced that China's normalization with South Korea should not affect its traditional close ties with North Korea, and Beijing should keep on military relations with the DPRK in good shapes (*Wenhuibao*, 25 August 1992). China's rhetoric for military support notwithstanding, the DPRK leaders became estranged from the PRC in the sense that mutual visits between the chief top-level leaders – Jiang Zemin and Li Peng, and Kim Il Sung and his junior Kim Jong Il – had never been arranged throughout the 1990s.

In contrast to military inducements, China's economic assistance – especially, food and energy aid – contributed to placating North Korea languishing in the loss of the Soviet subsidies. Due to the end of the Soviet support, China emerged as the North's last patron who supplied nearly three quarters of its food imports in the early 1990s (Ministry of Foreign Economic Trade of the PRC, 1997). The Chinese portion in the DPRK trade since 1992 had been increasing to a greater degree than even before its normalization with South Korea, except a sudden food export embargo in 1994 (Eberstadt, 1995). Alongside official trade, the annual energy aid such as 1 million tons of petroleum and 1.5 million tons of coal from China made up about 90% of the North's gross imports of energy from foreign countries. The PRC consistently applied a 'friendship price' system to trades with North Korea, contrary to its initial intention that the DPRK should abide by a hard currency system based on international market pricing. In a nutshell, after the normalization of Sino-South Korean diplomatic relations, China sought to advance food aid policy and other economic assistances as strategic inducements in order to justify Beijing's diplomatic shift from the 'lips and teeth' relations to an equidistance policy toward Pyongyang, while keeping North Korea within China's sphere of influence.

4.2 The North Korean food crisis

The great famine in North Korea was another decisive turning point in which the Chinese leaders began to openly mention that North Korea's long-term survival was questionable, emphasizing three major bottlenecks – lack of food, energy, and capital – as the core problems in North Korea's failed system of central planning (Snyder, 1997). The North Korean food crisis, indeed, threatened Beijing's policymakers with the massive inflow of North Korean refugees who had been crossing the

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border to forage for food. In particular, the North's sudden collapse following the uncontrollable famine would be the worst scenario to the PRC, which resulted in Beijing's engagement with the emergency shipment of food aid. From the Chinese point of view, the best option to minimize the spill-over effect of the North Korean food crisis was the augmentation of food supply contributing to the prolongation of the North's regime that would deal with humanitarian disasters for itself.

The PRC continued to increase the amount of food aid under the catchphrase of the consolidation of Pyongyang–Beijing relations (Table 2). Even when other donors sharply reduced food aid in response to the North Korean submarine infiltration across the demilitarized zone down to the South Korean territories on 18 September 1996, Beijing did not hesitate to increase the quantity of food grain (Satterwhite, 1997, p. 10). In 1996, the Chinese government announced that it would send 100,000 tons of grain in the hope of reducing the growing number of North Koreans illegally crossing into China's Jilin province (Noland, 2000, p. 187). On
9 May 1996, in an interview with *Kŭlloja* (Laborers), Hu Jintao, the member of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Politburo, called for further shipments of food assistance aiming to enhance the friendship between China and North Korea. Also, in May 1996, North Korean Deputy Premier Hong Song Nam and Chinese Premier Li Peng signed a memorandum of economic and technical cooperation including the Beijing's pledge of annual emergency shipment of 50,000 tons of food aid up to 2000. Another renewal of food aid was announced in July 1996 by the Secretary General of the State Council of China, Luo Gan, during his visit to Pyongyang to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance.

Table 2 China's food aid to the DPRK, 1996–2000

		1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Cereals	Coarse grains	160,000	90,000	104,180	115,063	325,963
	Milled paddy rice	10,000	30,000	18,618	78,697	42,392
	Wheat and wheat flour	–	–	47,656	19,309	60,184
Total		170,000	120,000	170,454	213,069	428,539

Source: FAOSTAT Database.

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In short, China's bilateral support for North Korea with food and economic assistances reflected its hands-on humanitarian efforts to engage famine in North Korea. However, further attention should be paid to the underlying purpose of Beijing's proactive involvement – preventing the sudden collapse of the current Kim Jong Il regime, rather than helping to cure its ailing neighbor with humanitarian relief assistance.

4.3 China's strategic interest

China's key strategic interest in the Korean Peninsula during the 1990s was not only to secure regional stability but also to sustain the continuity of the Kim Jong Il regime (Eberstadt and Ellings, 2001, pp. 331–339). Maintaining *status quo* on the Korean Peninsula was a necessary condition for the PRC to pursue economic growth and political security in its own domestic sphere. The most appalling threat from the sudden collapse of the Kim regime is Beijing's economic costs to resuscitate the former communist brother, as well as a large-scale flow of refugees across the border. Surely, the rampant famine in North Korea would bring about severe economic damages on the Chinese border region; it is already witnessed that North Korea's fiscal instability has bankrupted some Chinese companies that traded with North Korean counterparts. More importantly, the PRC would not view with pleasure a unified Korea bordering the Yalu River under the aegis of South Korea and the United States. The total collapse of North Korea caused by the economic failure would result in the introduction of a capitalistic economic system in the northern part of Korea, spawning the loss of a former Communist ally and the reinforcement of US-based alliance on the Korean Peninsula. Concerns about these precarious scenarios led Beijing to take steps for averting the North Korean economy from a sudden collapse.

Under these circumstances, Beijing had perceived and treated the DPRK not only as a longstanding socialist brother in need of economic aid, but also as a geopolitical asset for its strategic objectives. A series of collapses in the Communist bloc threatened China under the catchword of '*Su dong bo*' [malicious effects from collapses of the Soviet Union and Eastern European Communist states]. The continuous presence of the socialist regime in North Korea, from the Chinese perspective, was

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strategically critical to restrain the surge of Western pressure on China and also served the national security interests of China. Although China allowed American involvements in both the North's nuclear development and the food crisis, it feared that the overexpansion of US intervention would undermine China's influence on North Korea (Zhou, 1997). In this vein, it is fair to state that China's adherence to bilateral food assistance served to achieve some significant components of its strategic concerns: assisting regime survival in North Korea and consolidating China's sphere of influence in North Korea. Food diplomacy, thus, was one of effective options that Beijing could utilize for China's strategic objectives aiming to keep Pyongyang close to the Chinese side and to balance American influence in the region of Northeast Asia.

5 Strategic utilities of food aid: US and China compared

5.1 Food aid policies compared

Key differences between food aid policies of the United States and China are found in three dimensions: the degree of urgency; conditionality of food aid; and the delivery system. China was in a relatively urgent position compared to the United States. Under America's unipolar domination in the post-Cold War era, the worst scenario of DPRK's sudden collapse and its following fatal damage to China's economy urged Beijing to assure Pyongyang of its eagerness to protect North Korea by providing economic and food assistance. Such an immediate situation prompted Beijing to bear bilateral and least-conditional character of food aid policy, which was far more influential to Pyongyang than conditional and multilateral ways (Fig. 3). On the contrary, the United States had relatively more elbowroom in dealing with North Korea than did China. America's supremacy in world politics after the thawing of the Cold War allowed Washington to exercise military prowess or economic sanctions in dealing with hostile 'rogue states'. However, considering catastrophic spill-over effects from the North's total economic collapse and a sudden war against South Korea, Washington turned to the engagement strategy in order to induce Pyongyang to comply with international standards and norms by juxtaposing 'carrots and sticks' as occasion required. US food aid policy, accordingly, has been

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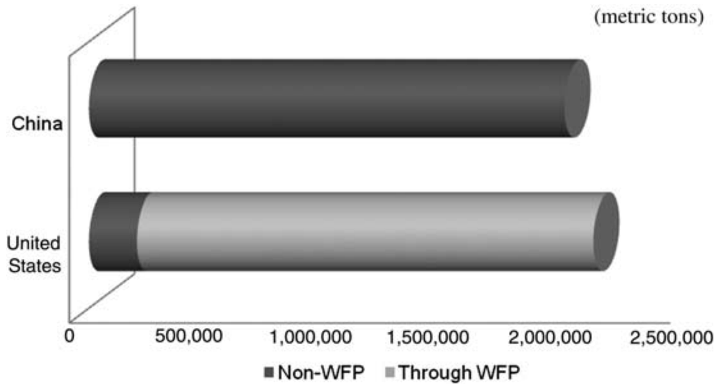

Figure 3 Multilateral delivery of food aid to North Korea, 1996–2004. *Source*: WFP INTERFAIS Database.

accompanied by 'soft' conditionality; for example, America's offers of food and energy had been made in exchange for the termination of North Korea's nuclear ambition within the Four-Party frameworks (O'Hanlon and Mochizuki, 2003). As for the delivery system of food aid, Washington preferred a circuitous way via multilateral international organizations in the face of the strong criticism from US Congress, even though it partially adopted bilateral routes for aid supply since 1999. Overall, US food aid policy can be characterized as one of 'rewarding inducements' to Pyongyang's reciprocal concessions which were, however, different from adjustment conditionality that is normally requested by aid donors.

Although China and the United States have different motivations and ways of delivering food aid to North Korea, both donors employed food diplomacy as a useful channel to pursue their strategic concerns over North Korean issues, which converge on two agendas – regional stability and the balance of influence. At the regional level, preserving stability on the Korean Peninsula was at the center of both donors' national interests. Shared common concerns over regional stability drove them to take actions for food supply aimed to prevent the sudden collapse of North Korea, even though Chinese and American relief aids had never been coordinated. At the global level, it is assumed that US–PRC rivalry in Northeast Asia should be understood in the context of a new global power struggle in the post-Cold War era (Goldstein, 2001). Under the US–PRC competition system, two donor states' active posture for food

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supply needs to be regarded as strategic undertakings for balancing each other in the sense that one's strategic stake is counterproductive in terms of the other's influence on the Korean Peninsula. The eventual result is that the fundamental objective of food aid relates to a search for a new equilibrium in the balance of influence around North Korea, thereby inducing Pyongyang to take sides with each of them or at least a neutral stance at any immediate moment on the Korean Peninsula.

5.2 Food aid for mutual interests

It is quite paradoxical that the outward appearance of food aid to North Korea was wrapped by moral values of humanitarianism, but its substantial contents were deeply rooted in donors' own strategic concerns (Lumsdaine, 1993). The crux of humanitarian development assistance depends upon whether donors achieve recipients' compliance with adjustment conditionality that the donors specify on aid as evidence of institutional change (Fox and Brown, 1998, pp. 6–7). However, given the strategic relations of food aid in North Korea, open discussions over aid accountability would be as inconvenient to both Washington and Beijing as they would be to Pyongyang, thereby numbing conditionality for donors' engagement with Pyongyang. How could the two donor states remain insensitive to donor fatigue in the face of the North's insolence to aid donors? A possible answer is that the United States and China both perceived food supply as a logical option working for their strategic interests under the assumption that one actor's unilateral assistance would undermine the other actor's interests and influence in North Korea. The underlying rationale of food aid is found in strategic relations between the two donor states, rather than in somewhere over aid relations based on humanitarianism. As long as Washington and Beijing did not feel donor fatigue seriously because their strategic interactions took place outside aid relations, North Korea was able to extract more food and economic assistances from two competing donors by expanding the driving-a-wedge strategy.

Figure 4 and Table 3 illustrate a particular situation where the United States and China consider food aid as a valid corollary of donors' strategic interests. A two-by-two game matrix shows a symmetrical payoff in that each player prefers mutual provision of food aid (SS) to mutual withholding (WW). It is assumed that mutually providing food aid for

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		Actor B (China)	
		S*	W
Actor A (United States)	S*	3,3**	4,1
	W	1,4	2,2

Figure 4 Food aid matrix. Number left (right) of comma refers to A's (B's) preference ordering (1, worst choice; 4, best choice). S, supplying food aid; W, withholding food aid. *Actor's dominant strategy; **equilibrium outcome.

Table 3 Payoffs and implications (in terms of the US side)

Payoff	Implication
(3,3):	Securing regional stability and balancing influence between the United States and China
(4,1):	Increasing American influence on North Korea and the possibility of the DPRK's taking sides with the United States
(1,4):	Increasing China's influence on North Korea and the possibility of the DPRK's taking sides with China
(2,2):	Increasing possibility of the sudden collapse of the North Korean economy

North Korea ensures that all actors can sustain the balance of influence between themselves and, at the least, one actor cannot be sidelined by the other, whereas mutually withholding increases the probability of a sudden collapse of North Korea that both actors do not want to see. Yet each player is even better off when one can benefit from the other's unilateral withholding of food aid (SW). By contrast, one ending the food provision while the other keeping providing food aid (WS) is the outcome that is least desirable from either player's point of view. It is simply because each actor perceives that unilateral provision of food aid can take more advantage of increasing its influence on North Korea than mutual provision of food aid. Thus, the preference ordering of both players is SW > SS > WW > WS.

The first implication that we can draw from this matrix is that the payoff of SS (3,3) is actors' dominant strategy – a course of action that maximizes an actor's returns no matter what the other chooses. Either the United States or China, thus, can take more benefit when each of

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them provides food aid to North Korea, rather than when they do not, regardless of the other's choice. Second, the combined result of their independent choices, SS (3,3), is a Pareto-optimal equilibrium outcome, one from which neither actor can shift unilaterally to better its own position. Such equilibrium implies that both China and the United States are consistently satisfied with the option of aid provisions to North Korea because both donors' satisfactions transpire only when they all coincidently choose the payoff of SS (3,3) – the mutual provision of food aid. This fact also indicates that American and Chinese strategic interests – either regional stability or the balance of influence – can be successfully achieved by not ending food aid to North Korea. As a result, the two donor states did seldom feel donor fatigue because the mutual provision of food aid is a Pareto-optimal situation in which food supply enables donors to realize their own strategic objectives. Therefore, humanitarian principles and the accountability problem attached to food aid became less important to the United States and China, but its normative value was of importance in camouflaging donors' strategic intentions under humanitarianism.

Another point that we need to think of lies in the positive prospect for policy cooperation between America and China. At the equilibrated payoff SS (3,3), there is no serious conflict between actors because each actor obtains its most preferred outcome by making independent decisions (Elster, 1979, p. 21; Stein, 1983, pp. 117–119). Nevertheless, the two actors often encounter conflicting situations set by competing and overlapped interests, for the reason that both actors seek for the same strategic purposes and perceive they are placed under the zero-sum game. An ideal type of cooperation, in which actors' interests are naturally harmonious and coincident, is less likely to call for an institutional intervention for policy coordination, but actors with a mixture of conflicting and complementary interests adjust their behaviors to the actual or anticipated preferences of others by way of coordination processes (Keohane, 1984, pp. 51–55; Axelrod and Keohane, 1986, p. 266). In theory, accordingly, institutional cooperation or policy networks for aid coordination between the United States and China could have been established in the sense that lack of cheating and the recognition of food supply as the optimal choice would steer donors into cooperating in launching an institutionalized network aimed to reduce policy discords between donors. In practice, however, it is hard to detect any evidence

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demonstrating that the two donors have ever attempted to construct institutions or even policy dialogues for cooperating with each other. Given this discrepancy between theory and reality, the question may be posed anew: why had donor states been unenthusiastic about policy coordination contributing to enhancing the effectiveness in aid delivery, even though, theoretically, they should have felt some degree of coordination necessary?

6 Difficulties in establishing institutional cooperation

The first possible account for the difficulties in establishing an institution for policy coordination is related to self-controlling property of institutional arrangements. Although there is no conflict among donor states, launching an institution, paradoxically, is bound to create a systematic shackle to set limits on donors' autonomy in pursuing their strategic objectives (Ikenberry, 2001, pp. 37–44). Institutional cooperation would lead the two donor states to lock themselves into a desired institution operating for policy coordination. In seeking the institutional commitment of all parties involved, donor states themselves have to establish organizational restraints on their own power so as to gain the acquiescence of the counterparts within the institution. Such a type of institutionalization hinges on the willingness of donor states to restrain their strategic concerns institutionally and bind themselves to long-term commitments (Grieco, 1993). In the end, strategic restraints for the foundation of an institution hamper all parties from pursuing their own interests through the institution. Given those inherent restraints inside the dynamics of institutionalization, China and the United States would not want to set institutional limits on their strategic maneuvers that could otherwise be exercised on the basis of their independent decisions. Thus, they have no imperatives to establish an institution coordinating food aid policies.

Second, the incentives of donor states to initiate policy coordination became less vital due to the relative power disparities in the dimension of US–China rivalry. John Ikenberry (2001, p. 5) points out that 'the more extreme the power disparities [...], the greater the capacity of the leading state to employ institutions to lock in a favorable order.' In the situation where the power and willingness of one leading state

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overwhelm those of the other states, it is in a more advantaged position for the leading state to exchange restraints on its power for institutional agreements and to trade off short-term gains for longer-term gains (Abbott and Snidal, 1998). Reversely, the more equivalent the distribution of power among states, the more undersized the incentives for states to establish institutional agreements that reduce their independent rights of strategic commitment. In this regard, the ripe of US–China rivalry de-motivated leaders of Washington and Beijing in creating an institutional coordination for food aid policies and made food aid delivered in a separate fashion. It is worth noting that lack of policy coordination reflects a political outcome from donors' power struggle for more influential position in the regional politics.

Finally, food aid is not suitable as an agenda for an institution because it will be ended some day when the recipient state overcomes the current food problems. For more durability and consolidation of policy coordination, the food aid issue must be linked with more far-reaching political agendas, such as how to induce North Korea into the international community or how to moderate strategic tensions between the United States and China beyond the balance of influence. While the plausibility of institutional cooperation between donor states would not be salient only through limited agendas such as food aid, humanitarian assistance would be one of the stepping-stones to expand the scope of cooperation agendas by attaching human security to the domains of political or economic cooperation.

All in all, although both China and the United States reached the consensus that the mutual provision of food aid would be the best option for their strategic goals, they were unwilling to take a further step for establishing an institutional coordination of aid policies, for fear of its institutional repercussions against donors' strategic concerns. Neverthe-less, it is vital to remember that institutional cooperation among donor states is an effective approach to draw appropriate accountability for humanitarian aid from Pyongyang and socialize the DPRK's closed authoritarian regime into international society.

7 Conclusion: 'aid to their own'

This study seeks to distinguish the food aid dynamics of North Korea from the other cases of humanitarian assistance, with the special

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attention to donors' strategic relations in parallel with aid relations. Its central distinction originates from the distorted application of humanitarian assistance, in the sense that the two main donors preferred how to strategize food aid in favor of their national interests to how to rehabilitate a famine-stricken country by cooperating with each other. Donors' intentional utilization of humanitarian aid was embedded in the strategic importance of the recipient state to each donor who was commonly searching for the equilibrated balance of influence in the post-Cold War East Asia. A sudden collapse of North Korea would bring the worst scenario to Washington that was reluctant to intervene in any ground wars on the Korean Peninsula as well as large-scale financial projects for the North's economic reconstruction. Likewise, China would fear that the total collapse of North Korea could generate massive inflows of refugees and other economic damages. More urgently, the breakdown of the Kim Jong Il regime would bring about the disappearance of the crucial buffer zone where Beijing has hitherto enjoyed averting the direct confrontation with the United States and its allies on the Korean Peninsula. In this strategic context, the two donors decided to provide food aid for North Korea, even though Pyongyang kept posing military threats against regional security. Therefore, donors' strategic relations characterize the nature of food aid as a temporary prescription for famine-stricken North Korea. Indeed, food aid to North Korea in the 1990s is seen as aid to donors' *own* interests, rather than aid for the recipient's restoration.

More importantly, the strategic embeddedness of donor's food aid marred the linkage between humanitarian aid and development projects. The emerging orthodoxy of humanitarian aid in the post-Cold War period is that 'international aid can and should play a role in the management of conflict, and that, in conflict situations, it can and should adopt developmental principles and approaches' (Macrae, 2001, p. 3). Given that the primary factor in deciding food aid to North Korea came decisively from strategic interactions among donor states, the prevailing principle of combining emergency relief aid and development-related conditionality failed to receive warm attention from both Washington and Beijing. The fundamentals of food aid, in this sense, were deeply embedded in strategic relations between donors, which were ironically entrenched under the humanitarian cloak of aid relations between donors and a recipient. In consequence, we now get to know how

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strategic relations help donors *strategizing* food aid as an effective tool to achieve their own strategic goals in the recipient area.

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