

The Candlelight Mandate & Moon Jae-in's Inter-Korean Dilemma

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The question of the proper relationship between domestic sentiment and foreign policy is a vexed one. Historically, statesmen and strategists have tended to distrust or disparage the role of the *demos* in the elite enterprise of foreign affairs. In the immortal words of the then vice president Richard Nixon: “If we indulge in the kind of thinking which assumes that foreign policy decisions should be made on the basis of public opinion polls we might as well decide now to surrender our position of world leadership to the communists.”² Yet from even the most condescending foreign policy establishment perch, it is hard to dispute the significance of securing public support for key foreign policy moves. Nixon as president was fully aware of this, carefully stage-managing his most dramatic maneuver, the visit to China in February 1972, in a way that would maximize support back home. And of course, Nixon’s loss of public trust over the Watergate scandal brought about the abrupt end of his influence on everything, including foreign affairs. Nixon’s impeachment, after years of public opposition to the war in Vietnam, strengthened the view in the United States that unsupervised elites were in fact the worst possible stewards of the instruments of national power, and that popular, democratic checks were critical ingredients in wise and prudent foreign policy.

Once the public is accorded a decisive role in foreign affairs deliberation, we have to grapple with the problem of determining what “the public” thinks in the first place. Who represents “the public”? How can we assert “it” thinks one way or another? What do we mean by expressions such as “the public seems to have changed its mind”? French theorist Pierre Bourdieu, for example, challenged the validity of statistical representations of “public opinion” based on polling data. Bourdieu argues that public opinion so constructed is an “artefact” of the pollsters, rather than a reflection of an actual thing in the world.³ Polling data creates a false sense of certainty about public preferences—the illusion of a static and knowable thing, “the public,” where one does not exist.

Despite the epistemological limitations and political biases embedded in the art of polling, public sentiment must be brought into the equation of foreign policy analysis. Particularly in a South Korean context, given the highly participatory nature of political culture, it would be foolish to adopt an elitist premise that the public factor can be ignored. South Korean president Moon Jae-in, for one, emphasizes the critical importance of democratic legitimacy and public input in all aspects of governance, including foreign policy.

Yet Moon faces a dilemma. He entered the Blue House with three foreign policy ropes tied like a noose around his neck: the “comfort woman” deal on the basis of which Seoul’s channels were reopened with Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, the Kaesong Industrial Complex closure on the basis of which channels were severed with Chairman Kim Jong-un, and the THAAD [Terminal High Altitude Area Defense] missile defense battery deployment on the basis of which ties were frayed badly with President Xi Jinping. Moon’s predecessor Park Geun-hye made these decisions abruptly, with little effort to prepare the public or win a broad consensus for them, and after Park’s impeachment, Moon campaigned against all three decisions. However, his electoral victory had little to do with foreign policy, leaving him without a clear mandate in terms of how to move forward.

Coming to power thanks to a “people power” movement known as the Candlelight revolution, President Moon drew heavily upon participatory mechanisms and worked hard to show that he was listening to the people. The Blue House created a new system

of online petitions, promising to tackle issues as sensitive as abortion in response to public comment, and Moon reversed his stand on shutting down a nuclear reactor after a citizen review came out against the plan.⁴ The Moon administration applied this same logic of “democratic procedural legitimacy” to the three foreign policy ropes by ordering external reviews of THAAD deployment, the “comfort women” deal, and Kaesong closure.⁵ With the conclusion of those reviews in December 2017, Moon finally began to implement his own foreign policy. As he did so, the question of domestic mandate came back to the fore. During his first year in the Blue House, Moon sustained record high public approval ratings. But as the dramatic peace-making diplomacy unfolded in early 2018, the question of whether Moon can sustain a domestic mandate resurfaced in new guise. Where is the Moon administration likely to encounter the most resistance in terms of public response to foreign policy moves? Are there ways Moon can approach public opinion in order to maximize the odds of achieving his foreign policy objectives? And how does he balance the need to be proactive and flexible in foreign policy implementation with the imperative to sustain public support among the citizenry?

The argument here begins with setting Moon's domestic mandate dilemma in the context of the contradictory foreign policy legacy he inherited from Park Geun-hye, the lack of clear foreign policy mandate from the Candlelight movement that put him in power, and the intensified need to be proactive on inter-Korean relations in the shrinking strategic space between Kim Jong-un's tests and Donald J. Trump's tweets. The Moon administration drew upon democratic or semi-democratic “review” mechanisms to escape the path dependence effect from the late Park era and maintain public support along the way. Stuck with the deployment of a THAAD battery that Koreans had mixed feelings about, Moon nonetheless improved ties with Xi Jinping on the basis of the “three noes.” Saddled with an unpopular deal meant to be the “final and irrevocable” settlement of the wartime sexual slavery issue, he stabilized ties with Abe by upholding the letter of the deal while rejecting the spirit of it. Finally, he opened a channel with Kim Jong-un through the Olympic détente, followed by a dramatic inter-Korean summit in Panmunjom on April 27, setting the stage for heavy diplomatic lifting to make progress on the bold agenda of “peace and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

Moon's maneuvers vis-à-vis Beijing and Tokyo were met with broad public support—or at least, did not trigger significant backlash. However, the initial efforts to reopen and improve inter-Korean relations met with pockets of public opposition and overall ambivalence. Although Moon emerged from the success of the Panmunjom summit with sky-high approval ratings, it is worth anticipating the domestic political complexity of a peace and reconciliation approach to inter-Korean relations, if only to mitigate their impact on progress with Pyongyang. In conclusion, it is argued that Moon's key foreign policy preferences—sustaining a robust alliance with the United States, restoring a close partnership with China, and allowing a working relationship with Japan—appear to be grounded in fairly strong domestic consensus. The challenging issue is likely to be in the sphere of inter-Korean relations. Here, Moon faces fragmented public sentiment, and consensus might prove elusive. Indeed, Bourdieu's warnings about the mirage of a monolithic “public opinion” seem especially germane when thinking through the question of public attitudes toward North Korea, inter-Korean relations, and Korean reunification. How to win and maintain a domestic mandate for improved inter-Korean relations is likely to be one of the most critical foreign policy challenges facing Moon during his years in the Blue House.

Candlelight Mandate

Park Geun-hye left a contradictory foreign policy legacy in the wake of her tempestuous final year as president of the Republic of Korea. As a candidate and in her first two and half years in office, she seemed to be developing a “third way” approach to foreign relations that borrowed in significant ways from a progressive paradigm while retaining key conservative features. The most notable progressive borrowings consisted in her effort to engage Pyongyang in what her administration hoped would be an inter-Korean “trust-building process,” along with her dramatic embrace of a close political relationship with new Chinese leader Xi Jinping, culminating in her appearance on the Tiananmen Square balustrade to watch China’s military parade celebrating the 70th anniversary of victory in the war against Japan. Yet Park managed to keep a stable relationship to Washington, in line with the public’s commitment to the U.S. alliance and favorable views toward the United States.⁶

However, during the space of a few months in late 2015-early 2016, Park abruptly reversed course, shifting to a neo-traditional conservative posture toward the key players in South Korean foreign policy. The first reversal came with Japan. Having let ROK-Japan relations atrophy for two years, Park held a summit with Abe in November and the following month announced a deal that purported to be the “final and irrevocable” resolution of the sensitive and controversial issue of Japanese wartime sexual enslavement of Korean women and girls (the “comfort woman” issue). Although Park had been criticized for letting this issue hijack all aspects of Korea-Japan relations, the sudden announcement of a final resolution based on a narrow government-to-government negotiation only inflamed the issue.⁷ With public opinion extremely negative toward Abe and lukewarm on Japan, Park’s deal confirmed many Koreans’ sense that Tokyo simply wanted the issue forgotten.⁸ There was very little public enthusiasm for or acceptance of the deal, and the backlash intensified as the Abe government insisted Seoul prevent civic groups from putting up remembrance statues of comfort women.⁹

The second reversal, in relations with Beijing, was triggered by North Korea’s fourth nuclear test in January 2016. Frustrated that Xi Jinping was unwilling to help in her hour of need, Park decided to move ahead with deployment of the controversial THAAD missile defense system, cognizant it would incur Beijing’s wrath. China retaliated with economic punishments including bans on group tourism, cancellations of cultural events, and coordinated “inspections” that shuttered business operations by the South Korean conglomerate Lotte, which had transferred a golf course to the government for use as the THAAD site. Naturally, South Koreans resented Beijing’s wielding of an economic stick. On the other hand, a majority of Koreans, while fretting over China’s military rise, want a good relationship with China for purely economic reasons.¹⁰ The THAAD spat only reinforced the importance of stable, friendly ties to Beijing, given South Korea’s economic vulnerability to the Chinese market in terms of trade and investment.

The third reversal was that Park closed the door to cooperation with Pyongyang. For the preceding three years in office, Park remained open to dialogue and improvement in relations with Kim Jong-un, preserving a posture of openness despite numerous ups and downs. She stuck with her signature “trust-building process” despite Pyongyang’s pre-

inauguration nuke test in February 2013 and the ensuing springtime shadow war. Her first tangible effort at reconciliation came with family reunions in February 2014, and Kim Jong-un sent top aides to the Asian Games in Incheon in October. However, nothing much came of their visit. In August 2015, a landmine incident in the DMZ raised tensions once again—and Park authorized high-level talks resulting in a six-point agreement to stabilize and improve ties. Implementation had already bogged down by the time of the fourth nuclear test on January 6, 2016, followed by the satellite launch on February 7, 2016. Park responded by ordering the closure of the joint industrial plant at Kaesong.

Kaesong closure had a polarizing effect. Progressive advocates of engagement were outraged, and the progressive newspaper *Hankyoreh* took issue with flaws in the argument put out by the Ministry of Unification to justify the decision on grounds that Kaesong profits funded Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs.¹¹ Even some conservatives had doubts about the shutdown.¹² By shuttering Kaesong, Park foreclosed the last remaining platform for inter-Korean cooperation built during the Sunshine era. Not even during the more hardline era of her predecessor, Lee Myung-bak, faced with the sinking of the *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeonpyeong island, was Kaesong shut down. Still, polling indicated a strong majority of the public approved of the closure.¹³ Predictably, North Korea severed the military hotline to the South and stopped responding to the communications channel at Panmunjom. The line to Pyongyang was cut. The line to Beijing was frayed. The line was reopened to Tokyo, and loud and clear to Washington.

By mid-year, Park had seemingly restored a traditional conservative foreign policy posture. But before the public could fully judge its merits, the Park presidency came crashing down in a cascade of private scandal and public outrage. The Candlelight movement that toppled Park is critical to understanding the Moon government, including its foreign policy. It is a paradoxical effect since the movement had so little to do with foreign affairs. The Candlelight protests relit the spirit of citizenship in South Korea, tapping into widespread revulsion against corrupt practices, vested interests, and social injustice. They were led from the center-left but represented a broad social consensus around the yearning for a fresh start, for an open and transparent government, for a domestic political and economic reset.¹⁴ Protestors' chants evolved from 'Park Geun-hye, Resign!' to 'Impeach Park Geun-hye/ Disband Saenuri/ Break up the Conglomerates' (note the absence of foreign policy issues). At its peak, Candlelight brought over a million people into the streets of Seoul and cities across the country. Park's disapproval rating bottomed out at 91%, an extraordinary, if tragic, moment of civic solidarity.¹⁵ It was a very broad tent, and the under-45 demographic—from Gen X families with young kids and baby strollers to Millennials still in school—was well represented at the weekly rallies in Gwanghwamun Square.

Over time, counter-protests emerged. Although much smaller in scale than the Candlelight marches, the so-called "ROK flag" protests were sociologically significant given the striking demographics: the participants were overwhelmingly in their 60s or older. Unlike Candlelight marchers, the pro-Park protestors incorporated a foreign policy stance into the outward symbolism of their movement by carrying not one but two flags—those of the ROK and USA. Devoted Park supporters rallied on the day that the Constitutional Court upheld her impeachment in March, and railed in anger and sorrow, flags in hand. Three people died, ages 60, 72 and 74, that day.¹⁶

At a final Candlelight rally just before the election in early May, billed as a victory party, some organizing groups tried to shift the movement toward opposition to THAAD. But the Candlelight masses did not follow the move toward foreign relations issues. The compressed campaign to choose Park's successor was dominated by domestic challenges. When foreign policy and national security questions came up, Moon affirmed a progressive approach while leaving himself room on policy particulars. He strongly rejected Park's "comfort women" deal, yet he affirmed the importance of maintaining an open channel with Tokyo. Just before election day, the U.S. and ROK militaries fast-tracked THAAD deployment, making it a fait accompli for the winner, and the Moon campaign criticized the move.¹⁷ But Moon stressed the importance of a strong alliance with Washington, along with a close partnership with Beijing. He was critical of the Kaesong closure, promising to reopen and expand the complex as a "stepping stone of Korean reunification."¹⁸ At the same time, Moon affirmed the importance of stopping North Korea's nuclear progress, including through the use of sanctions. Given his background as Roh Moo-hyun's chief of staff, voters closely associated Moon with the Sunshine Policy of engagement with Pyongyang and inter-Korean reconciliation, principles that Moon reaffirmed during the campaign. But how he would revive the concept, in the changed conditions two decades after Kim Dae-jung inaugurated it, remained unclear.

In the May 2017 election, conservatives and older voters backed Hong Jun-pyo, the standard-bearer of a rechristened conservative party (Liberal Korea Party), giving him about a quarter of the votes. Centrists gravitated toward Ahn Cheol-su, who won 21 percent of the electorate with a heterogeneous bloc that also included regional supporters from the southwest [under the flag of the People's Party] as well as Ahn's original post-partisan adherents. Moon Jae-in handily defeated his two main rivals by commanding 40 percent of the vote, what might be called the Candlelight coalition. He performed well among Millennials and Gen Xers, for some of whom Candlelight marked an initiation into active political life, an expression of their yearning for a new politics and social progress. By evicting Park and electing Moon, the Candlelight movement endowed the new president with a clear and powerful mandate for domestic reform.

Coming after the outrage over Park and sense of deep political disillusionment, President Moon skillfully tapped into people's hope for a fresh start. He rapidly doubled the size of his popular support—polls showed him receiving an 80 percent approval rating over the course of his first months in office. From the moment he settled into the Blue House, Moon effectively conveyed the image that the Candlelight coalition elected him to project—openness, transparency, justice, and reform. There was one catch—the Candlelight coalition did not as a group articulate clear expectations on the central foreign policy questions facing their country—how to balance China's rise and the U.S. alliance, how to lift the burden of the past in dealing with Japan, and how to handle the North Korean conundrum. Moon's Candlelight mandate on domestic social, economic, and political issues did not extend with much clarity into the sphere of foreign affairs.

Fire and Fury

Outside the domestic bubble of South Korea's snap presidential election, an overpowering geopolitical and diplomatic dynamic was at work on the Korean Peninsula, creating a vortex that would sweep Seoul into its wake and leave Moon limited room to maneuver. Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump were well into a spitting contest that began on New Year's Day, when Kim swore he would test an ICBM that could threaten the U.S. homeland with a nuke and Trump tweeted back "It won't happen!" Tensions spiked in April with Kim threatening to fire missiles around Guam and Trump warning that an "armada" was on its way to Korea. Kim called off the Guam plan, but he continued testing a dizzying array of rockets, including a new IRBM and a pair of successful ICBM tests in July. In August, Trump threatened Kim with "fire, fury, and frankly power the likes of which the world has never seen." To start September, North Korea staged a massive thermonuclear detonation, and soon after, standing before the United Nations General Assembly, Trump threatened to "totally destroy" North Korea. DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho, in New York for the UNGA, responded by suggesting Pyongyang might next conduct an atmospheric nuclear test over the Pacific. Kim's testing regime slowed in the fall, punctuated by a final ICBM launch on November 28, on the basis of which Kim proudly declared that his Strategic Rocket Force had "completed" its mission.

These represent only the highlights of what seemed like a constant stream of provocation and counter-provocation between Pyongyang and Washington over the course of 2017. Veteran Korea hands agreed the intensity of U.S.-DPRK antagonism was unprecedented in comparison with the past few decades. For Seoul, the salient characteristic of this confrontation cycle was that South Korea was relegated to the role of bystander. The Trump administration aggressively and directly responded to almost every move made by Kim Jong-un. On the diplomatic front, led by the then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson with the on-off backing of Trump, the effort focused heavily on the role of China, rather than South Korea, as the key to progress. Trump made North Korea the number one issue in U.S.-China relations and said on multiple occasions that China could solve the problem if it wanted to. At a nadir of Trump-Moon relations, he condescendingly tweeted to Moon that he should not waste his time with a policy of "appeasement" toward Pyongyang.

An even more perilous form of "Korea passing" emerged over the course of the year, as preventive strikes and other euphemisms for war moved from fringe ideas to mainstream policy debate in the United States. The debate was triggered not by experts—the majority of whom argued forcefully against military action—but rather by the administration's frequent warnings that "if diplomacy fails" it would turn to force. The U.S. debate over the merits of military action implicitly devalued the strategic and human significance of South Korea—even those who argued against military options often pointed out that hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens residing in South Korea might perish in the ensuing conflict. The ultimate expression of South Korea's marginalization, if not dehumanization, was Senator Lindsey Graham's public comment that in conversation with the president, Trump told him it might be necessary to fight the war now while the casualties would be "over there," rather than let North Korea get to the point where Kim could threaten the homeland with a nuclear-tipped ICBM.

A secondary case for military action was made by Trump's then-national security advisor, H.R. McMaster, who asserted that Kim Jong-un was so brutal he could not necessarily be deterred without the use of actual force, and that he was so aggressive, if he were not stopped he would pursue coercive reunification with if not military invasion of South Korea. McMaster told *New Yorker* reporter Evan Osnos, "There are reasons why this situation is different from the one we were in with the Soviets. The North Koreans have shown, through their words and actions, their intention to blackmail the United States into abandoning our South Korean ally, potentially clearing the path for a second Korean War."¹⁹ National security experts and Korea watchers in Washington elevated the assessed risk of a conflict on the peninsula, with 25 percent becoming a common estimate.²⁰ Members of Congress also began ringing alarm bells about the rising risk of war in Korea.²¹ By December, Graham put the chance of military action at 30 percent, rising to 70 percent if North Korea were to stage a seventh nuclear test.²² Public opinion polls, of which there were many, indicated elevated fears among Americans of conflict breaking out—with three-quarters of respondents worrying about war in Korea and an even higher percentage saying Trump's threats of military action should be taken at face value.²³

The spiraling tensions between Trump and Kim, laced by what seemed to be an increasingly real prospect of military conflict, created a severe political dilemma for the Moon presidency. Moon was performing well on the domestic issues that people elected him to tackle. While critics to his right tried to attack him on national security and foreign policy issues, nothing stuck. However, Moon was trapped in the path dependence created by Park's triple reversal, and in particular, he was hamstrung in his effort to interject South Korea into a meaningful role in the standoff between the United States and North Korea. Kim Jong-un was not making things any easier. Moon floated a pair of proposals to reopen channels and probe for cooperation, suggesting a resumption of military talks and family reunions. But Pyongyang threw cold water on the ideas (without formally rejecting them). The North also snubbed the initial effort by South Korean civic groups to restore contacts and resume cooperation, starting with the benign concept of a joint celebration on the anniversary of the first inter-Korean summit. This had a dampening effect on the capacity for civil society actors to support initiatives by Moon to improve North-South relations and insert Seoul back into the North Korea equation. While McMaster was warning ominously that Kim was undeterrable, his counterpart in Seoul, Chung Eui-yong, insisted there was zero possibility of war.²⁴ Many South Korean experts agreed.²⁵ The South Korean public appeared significantly less concerned about the prospect of conflict than Americans—one poll found 37 percent of respondents thought war was possible, a decrease from a few years ago.²⁶ The relatively subdued attitude of the South Korean public was an asset in that Moon did not need to act in desperation in response to domestic pressure—on the other hand, the level of U.S.-DPRK tension was objectively becoming a danger to South Korean security and public safety in a way that demanded intervention by Moon.

By September, Moon spoke openly of his "frustration and sadness" over Pyongyang's intransigence in opening the channel.²⁷ North Korean statements stuck to the party line that the only way for inter-Korean progress was for Moon to break with the United States and its pressure campaign against the DPRK. But the Moon government and likeminded actors, including the United Nations Secretariat, kept probing for a breakthrough. A series of backchannel contacts in China in December, in the wake of Kim's declaration that he had "completed" progress, may have represented a turning point. Moon openly acknowledged

that he had requested Washington to delay joint U.S.-ROK military exercises until after the Olympics and reiterated his invitation to Pyongyang to participate. Yet he was careful to affirm the importance of the alliance and respect for Trump. Virtually the only place where Moon took a contrary stand was his regular insistence that war was not an option—an implicit rebuke to White House suggestions that military solutions were very much “on the table.”

Three Reviews of Foreign Policy

Moon began to break free of the path dependency of Park Geun-hye's reversals by the end of 2017, and started the new year implementing something closer to his own foreign policy. The first breakthrough came with Beijing, where Moon could count on fairly widespread support in working to restore a constructive relationship to China—for economic self-interest if nothing else.²⁸ Strategic calculus and domestic political incentives aligned in a way that encouraged Moon to find a way to strengthen ties to Xi Jinping and mitigate the damage caused by the row over THAAD. Despite the THAAD sanctions, most South Koreans wanted to see an improvement in Seoul-Beijing ties. The political danger was that giving in too much to Beijing could cause a rupture in the ROK-U.S. alliance or cast an image of weakness in the face of Chinese “bullying,” either of which would invite domestic criticism.

Moon stalled for time by conducting an environmental review of the THAAD battery site, emphasizing the problem of “procedural legitimacy” in the manner in which the deployment decision was made and suspending deployment of the four additional launchers in June. On his visit to Washington, Moon explicitly linked THAAD to public sentiment and his Candlelight mandate:

“Deployment of THAAD prompted some people to voice concern over the future of the alliance. The discussion taking place inside the Korean government on this issue is a vital process for ensuring democratic legitimacy and procedural transparency. This is a matter of crucial importance to my government that was born on the Candlelight Revolution.”²⁹

However, in the face of Kim's blistering pace of missile tests and Trump's “maximum pressure” campaign, Moon dropped the suspension of additional launchers in early August and announced “conditional” approval of the environmental assessment in September.³⁰ Although local protests against THAAD continued at the site in Seongju, and sporadic, small-scale rallies were held in Seoul, THAAD opposition was not a galvanizing issue for the public at large—indeed, polls indicated a strong majority supported the deployment.³¹ Whatever reservations Moon might have harbored as to the military necessity for a THAAD battery, there was no diplomatic space or domestic imperative to push for undoing the deployment.

Instead, Moon devised a diplomatic stratagem to improve ties to Xi Jinping despite retaining THAAD. This was realized in late October with coordinated statements by the foreign ministries in Seoul and Beijing announcing they would put bilateral relations back on a normal track.³² Beijing implicitly relented to the presence of a THAAD battery on South Korean soil. ROK foreign minister Kang Kyung-wha, meanwhile, articulated what was called the “three noes”: no further THAAD batteries would be deployed; no further integration into U.S.-led regional missile defense would be pursued; no trilateral military alliance with Japan (and the U.S.) would be declared.

The agreement with Beijing opened Moon to criticism for forsaking the alliance with the United States. But speaking with South Korean journalists, National Security Advisor McMaster avoided criticizing Moon's decision.³³ Soon thereafter, Trump's visit to Seoul went well both in terms of public diplomacy and private discussions. Moon and his advisors were pleasantly surprised by Trump's respectful, serious, and open attitude. The visit was short, but there were no gaffes, Trump's speech at the National Assembly was well received, the First Lady made a very positive impression. Although the South Korean public had been highly negative on Trump, polls found improvement after seeing him up close.³⁴ By showing Moon to be a good steward of the alliance, Trump's visit inadvertently affirmed Moon's outreach to Beijing, since it had not damaged the relationship to the White House. In early December, Moon made a four-day visit to Beijing, Nanjing, and Chongqing. Moon's China trip received largely negative coverage back in South Korea, marred as it was by the beating of a South Korean journalist by Chinese security guards and protocol slights such as a low-level greeting at the airport and unaccompanied meals. Despite the failure of the trip in terms of public diplomacy back home, Moon achieved his diplomatic goal of holding a constructive summit with Xi, and there was no major backlash against either the "three noes" or the trip.³⁵ The damage of Park's THAAD deployment decision had been partially undone, without triggering domestic blowback in South Korea.

On the heels of the Trump visit and Xi summit, Moon tackled the thorny problem of relations with Abe and the legacy of the "comfort women" deal. Although Moon criticized the agreement as a candidate, he was careful to establish an open channel with Tokyo after taking office. A line to Tokyo was especially important in the early days, given how Abe had established a confidant relationship with Donald Trump—in the words of Shelia Smith, a "buddy and friend."³⁶ This was captured in the infamous photograph at Mar-A-Lago of the makeshift U.S.-Japan national security caucus on how to respond to a North Korean missile test, which led to a press conference at which Abe spoke at length and Trump added only a single sentence. For this reason alone, Moon would have wanted to have his own channel to Abe. Yet the unpopular "comfort women" deal hung like a cloud over Korea-Japan relations.

Moon's solution was to commission an outside panel of experts to review the process behind the deal. Formed at the end of July, the nine-member panel announced its findings in December, on the basis of which Foreign Minister Kang announced that the government would not formally abrogate the agreement. But while upholding the fact of the deal, the Moon government rejected the spirit of it, claiming that the Park government approach lacked procedural and democratic legitimacy. So, while Moon would not seek to renegotiate the deal, he made it clear that the wartime sexual slavery issue was not considered "solved" from Seoul's perspective. At the same time, in encouraging Abe to attend the upcoming Olympics, Moon made his intention clear to keep a regular channel open to Tokyo. Polling suggested that a majority of people approved of Moon's somewhat ambiguous handling of the issue.³⁷

At the same time that the "comfort women" review panel announced its findings, the Policy Reform Committee of the Ministry of Unification did the same. The Committee was launched in September composed of figures from outside government.³⁸ Tasked with advising on a new direction for North Korea policy, the focus of its press conference on December 27 was to release the conclusions of its review of the Park administration's decision to shut

down the Kaesong joint industrial zone. The panel found no evidence that Kaesong funds had in fact been diverted to North Korea's illicit weapons programs, as claimed in the Park government's closure announcement. Addressing the issue of procedural legitimacy, the panel concluded that the decision was made in an "unilateral and verbal" way—in other words, as fiat by Park Geun-hye, rather than based on institutional review, including sanctions procedures.³⁹ The committee advised the Moon government to reopen the plant as soon as conditions allowed. The Ministry of Unification announced that it "humbly accepts" the finding and promised to boost transparency.⁴⁰ The Kaesong closure discussion was theoretical in the sense that no one expected Moon to reopen the plant anytime soon. However, just a few days after the announcement, the prospect of inter-Korean cooperation suddenly became real for the first time since Moon took office.

Moonshadow

The inter-Korean détente of early 2018 exposed what may prove to be the most serious dilemma facing Moon's foreign policy in so far as public opinion is concerned, of how to win and sustain public support for a policy of dialogue, reconciliation, and cooperation with North Korea. This challenge should come as no surprise to Moon and his advisors. After all, domestic consensus proved to be the Achilles Heel of the original Sunshine Policy, on which many of them labored. Although in the early years (for most of the Kim Dae-jung term) the policy enjoyed widespread support, by the end of the Roh Moo-hyun era public support was flagging.⁴¹ During the progressives' subsequent decade in the political wilderness, Sunshine Policy advocates only strengthened their convictions about the correctness of their approach, while many recognized the need to re-establish a public consensus behind the policy. Conservative critics, meanwhile, grew equally confident in their opposition to the wisdom of engagement. But the problem of public sentiment became increasingly complex as a new generation came of age in the absence of contact with the North. Today, the Moon government faces a fragmented public. "386" progressives will support his efforts to improve inter-Korean relations. Older conservatives will attack. But younger Koreans will respond based on a different paradigm entirely.

Today's college-age South Korean is too young to appreciate the early euphoric moments of inter-Korean rapprochement of the Kim Dae-jung era. Teenagers who became curious about North Korea in the last decade could find themselves investigated for violating the National Security Law with a Facebook post or ironic retweet—the criminalization of curiosity since 2008 had a dampening effect.⁴² The most vivid experience of inter-Korean relations for Millennials was the violent conflict of 2010, leaving an intensely negative impression. The concept of a "*Cheonan* generation" is probably a distortion but gets at a generational fact.⁴³ Survey research indicates more negative views toward North Korea among younger South Koreans compared with their elders. The polls also indicate young South Koreans are significantly less interested in reunification.⁴⁴ Surveys conducted by the Justice Party's foundation demonstrate that among people over 60 years old, 75 percent consider unification a duty, whereas under 40, only 36 percent consider it necessary. The Asan Institute for Policy Studies comes to similar conclusions based on its polling, describing "youth detachment" toward North Korea.⁴⁵

Steve Denney and others have argued that apathy and negativity toward North Korea reflect something deeper—a shift away from an ethnic conception of Korean identity among young South Koreans.⁴⁶ Coming of age after the democratic transition and alienated by decades from a sense of connection to people in the north, Millennials think of themselves as citizens of the Republic of Korea, full stop. The ROK is not a divided half—it is whole and complete unto itself. Instead of caring about healing the wound of division, they care about making South Korea a fair, just, prosperous place. They read Sandel and Piketty. They march for a better ROK. Younger Koreans are often described as “individualistic” and “pragmatic” unlike their “ideological” and “romantic” elders. Even those who identify as “nationalistic” direct their patriotism toward the ROK, as distinct from the DPRK. Their nationalism is not frustrated at the thought of division, it springs from it.⁴⁷

The weaker sense of pan-Korean ethnic solidarity and diminished need to rectify division exacerbates Moon’s dilemma in winning youth support for inter-Korean reconciliation. But the dilemma is not limited to Millennials. It seems safe to say that for the vast majority of South Koreans at this stage in history, “domestic” issues take precedence over inter-Korean relations. Progressives who support dialogue do not want it to detract from addressing social injustice. Conservatives who take a hard line do not want it to jeopardize economic growth. Under-45ers do not want North Korea issues detracting from urgent political, economic, and social reform. Almost no one wants to pay for reunification, even those who yearn for it spiritually, as Lee Myung-bak’s “unification tax” initiative demonstrated. But if the risks of U.S.-DPRK conflict are real, Moon finds himself in a bind, as he cannot afford to ignore North Korea. Once broken, the delicate balance that allows South Koreans to indulge the luxury of disinterest, to focus on “domestic” matters and essentially ignore the North, could never be restored. But under current conditions, his public is prone to punish him politically for paying too much attention to Pyongyang.

The complexity of public sentiment is on full display now that the two Koreas are talking, interacting, even trying to get along. Moon’s concept of involving North Korea in the Winter Olympics garnered overall public support. But the devil was in the details. There was a negative reaction to Pyongyang’s unexplained 24-hour delay in sending their inspection delegation, for example. There were mixed feelings about walking under a joint flag and singing to a joint tune. But the sharpest resistance, especially from younger Koreans, came in response to the announcement of a joint women’s hockey team. The Moon government had unwittingly tripped over the third rail of Candlelight politics—they acted in a high-handed, paternalistic manner and violated a common-sense notion of fairness. The government made the decision without consulting the team (un-democratic) and seemed to be sacrificing the interests of individual athletes who might be cut to make room at the last minute for the North Korean players (unjust). Picking the women’s team probably added to the perception of paternalistic, chauvinistic bias. Although it was hard to disaggregate the impact of the Olympic truce arrangements from perceived missteps by the government—most significantly the bitcoin controversy—Moon’s golden approval ratings, which started slipping in December, continued to slide, with noticeable uptick in negativity among young respondents.⁴⁸

The Blue House acknowledged the discontent, releasing a statement on behalf of the president appealing for solidarity and pleading for understanding of the geopolitical stakes and hinting at the Candlelight spirit. “I ask the people to show their support in maintaining

and expanding the dialogue as they will protect a candle in the wind, which we may not be able to create such an opportunity again... I also ask the political circle and the media to lend their support at least for the successful hosting of the Pyeongchang Olympics.”⁴⁹ Blue House officials “humbly accepted” findings that young people were not happy with the joint hockey team, and a postmortem by the Unification Ministry acknowledged the need to improve consultations with the public, as Seoul eyed a third inter-Korean summit based on the invitation extended to Moon by Kim Jong-un’s sister Kim Yo-jong during her three-day visit.⁵⁰ Moon’s support rate inched back up above 60 percent. But it was a cautionary tale in the difficulties facing Moon as he seeks to sustain support for inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation going forward.

Do You Have to Reunify?

A necessary (albeit not sufficient) condition for Moon Jae-in’s success in achieving his foreign policy goals will be the strength of public consensus behind them. Moon’s foreign policy preferences seem to lean toward revived linkages with North Korea, a close partnership with China, a strong alliance with the United States, and neutral ties to Japan. Moon’s preferences on managing ties to the United States, China, and Japan seem to conform to public sentiment. Retaining the THAAD battery while promising “three noes” did not trigger a backlash. Nor did the “uphold the letter, reject the spirit” approach to the “comfort woman” deal. The hard part from a public opinion perspective looks like it will be winning and sustaining public support for improved inter-Korean relations. Progressives and conservatives will clash, while the under-45s will sit back in judgment, case by case, depending on the results and how they affect the things about which they care most deeply.

The Moon government would appear to be in need of a multilayered strategy to lead the fragmented public forward on the pressing challenge of inter-Korean relations. Moon must contain the fallout from conservatives who will criticize every misstep based on deeply-held ideological and principled convictions. While defending their free speech, he will have to be prepared for and respond as best he can to their criticisms. Second, he has to rally the support of progressives, reinvigorate civic society engagement on the inter-Korean issue, and broaden the aperture of exchange beyond narrow government channels. Civic groups and local actors played a catalytic role in the Sunshine decade, and they need to be enlisted again in support of a new chapter in inter-Korean reconciliation.

Finally, and most importantly, Moon might need to do more *listening* to the under-45ers and understand where they are coming from on inter-Korean issues. He will have to resist the temptation to tell them what to think, or assume he knows what they mean, let alone try to indoctrinate them with the “right” answers. Consider Moon’s answer when pressed by a foreign journalist during the campaign on the question of young people’s lack of affinity with North Korea and resistance to reunification. Moon responded:

“It is not that they are less enthusiastic about reunification. Rather, they have more immediate challenges, like finding a job. On top of that, the two [previous] conservative administrations pursued a different strategy. They pursued reunification by absorption, assuming that the North would collapse quickly. Under that scenario, there is a cost issue. Young people are concerned about the cost they might have to shoulder. That’s why they seem less in favor of

reunification. The only way to reduce the cost of reunification is to achieve economic reunification first through inter-Korean economic cooperation, then later, ultimately, legal and political reunification.”⁵¹

Implicit in his answer is a refusal to consider the possibility that young South Koreans have a fundamentally different framework for national identity and Koreanness. If young South Koreans do not identify with the ethnic solidarity underpinnings of reunification theory that is implicitly shared by progressives and conservatives of Moon’s generation, he will need to come to grips with that reality, rather than try to explain it away.

When Donald Trump visited Seoul he reportedly asked Moon point blank: “Do you have to reunify?” In response,

“Moon took the opportunity to educate Trump on the history of the Korean conflict and relate that to the crisis facing the peninsula today.... Moon told Trump about his great sense of responsibility for those people who are still in North Korea, suffering under the inhumane treatment of the Kim Jong Un regime. Moon also talked about the need to bring the light of democracy to the North Korean people.”⁵²

That “history of conflict” is something Moon’s generation lived through directly—he was brought as a small child from North to South during the Korean War. But for Millennials, it is a history to read about in books. Committed to preserving democratic life in their country, they do not necessarily feel the same onus to spread the “light of democracy” to the other country to their north. As their leader, Moon may need to give them a new language and logic for inter-Korean reconciliation—or maybe peaceful co-existence is a better term. After the flowering of civic spirit during the Candlelight movement, Moon and his advisors need to rethink the question of reunification as their society moves from a pan-ethnic to an ethno-civic concept of national identity, as the political definition of ethnic community seems to have narrowed among many young South Koreans, to no longer *necessarily* include the North.

Moon may need to invent a new language about inter-Korean “harmony” that does not presuppose a commitment to reunification or a strong identification with pan-ethnic nationalist solidarity. While probably no Korean wants to affirm division, most younger Koreans do not embrace reunification either. Can Moon invent a new symbolic vocabulary to give expression to this sentiment, which is perhaps shared in the North as well? For example, could Seoul and Pyongyang jointly celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of their separate states in August and September this year in a way that recognizes one another’s existence, and in that sense, affirms both unity and division? Was Kim Jong-un hinting at such an idea when he mentioned the anniversary of the founding of the DPRK in his New Year’s Speech in the same breath as offering to send a delegation to participate in the South’s Winter Games? This is just one concrete example of how a new language of “peaceful co-existence” could be politically acted out in new symbolic terms.

Apart from this ideational level, Moon would be wise to continually stress the ways in which inter-Korean dialogue, reconciliation, and cooperation make meaningful improvements in the daily lives and address the things most South Koreans care most about. For example, back during the campaign when Moon explained his support for expanding the Kaesong

Industrial Complex, he defended it as “a stepping stone of Korean reunification.”⁵³ That rationale might not make sense to younger Koreans. But if Moon explains how resumed inter-Korean economic cooperation can create opportunities and growth in the South, then at the very least the idea will speak to young people’s priorities. The problem of course is that in appealing to younger Koreans and developing a new vocabulary for inter-Korean rapprochement, Moon risks antagonizing older Koreans—even progressives. Also, he cannot be sure how events and processes of renewed interaction will in themselves alter public attitudes, for better or worse. Perhaps there is some consolation in the one advantage of a single-term presidency, liberating a leader to think beyond re-election, since there is none.

The overwhelming public support for Moon’s daring gambit to hold a day-long summit with Kim Jong-un inside the DMZ provided more indication that the president has his finger on the people’s pulse when it comes to handling North Korea. The rhetoric and symbolism around “reunification” resonated with Koreans of Moon’s own age, while the prospect of reduced tensions, perhaps even serious progress toward peaceful co-existence, is in line with the preferences of younger South Koreans. Can Moon hold this coalition together as his peace offensive advances into the harder stages of resolving the nuclear threat and transforming the Armistice regime with a peace system? This is without doubt one of the central questions facing the Moon administration in the months and years ahead.

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