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PRESIDENT PARK GEUN-HYE'S UNIFICATION VISION AND POLICY

By Jo Dongho

Abstract

Achieving unification has been one of the most important national goals of all South Korean presidents. President Park is no exception, and clarifies that building a foundation for national unification is one of the four major objectives of her government. Her basic perceptions are “from small unification to big unification” and “unification bonanza.” In order to seek unification, she takes three tasks: 1) normalizing inter-Korean relations through a trust-building process, 2) embarking on small-scale unification projects that will ultimately lead to a complete integration of the two Koreas, and 3) taking practical measures to prepare for unification by strengthening unification capabilities. President Park’s unification vision is desirable in that her administration is taking a balanced approach between unification and exchanges and cooperation while past administrations took a lopsided approach either toward exchanges and cooperation or toward unification. Another positive aspect of Park’s unification vision is that she approaches unification in terms of benefit rather than cost. However, criticism can be raised given that it may not be appropriate to seek out unification while even rudimentary official dialogue has been blocked. Resuming dialogue should be a priority in order to achieve peaceful unification.

Introduction

“Our wish is unification.” This is a song the Korean people have been singing since childhood. For most Koreans, unification is a lifelong mission that must be accomplished. Korea had been one nation since the Shilla dynasty established a unified kingdom on the Korean Peninsula in 676. Therefore, the nation’s current divided status is unusual from a historical perspective. Having experienced tragedy and bitterness during the Korean War, and suffering numerous provocations from North Korea after the war, Koreans consider unification the only fundamental solution to the consistent threat of another war on the peninsula. Moreover, unification is expected to provide an opportunity for further growth of the Korean economy.

In addition, separated family issues make unification one of the most urgent tasks for the South Korean government. As of June 2014, the number of South Korean applicants for reunion is 129,553. The applicants are those who have parents or siblings in North Korea. If we define separated family in a broader sense, such as including the applicants’ children and/or grandchildren, the number is estimated to be several million. Indeed, there is a saying in Korea “ten million separated families’ *hahn* (inner rancor and sorrow).”

In this regard, overcoming division or achieving unification has been one of the most important national goals of South Korean presidents. In fact, according to Korean Constitution Article 69, the oath of office commands the Republic of Korea president to pursue peaceful unification of the homeland. Like her predecessors, President Park has shown a strong interest in unification issues. In 2002, President Park Geun-hye, then chairperson of the political

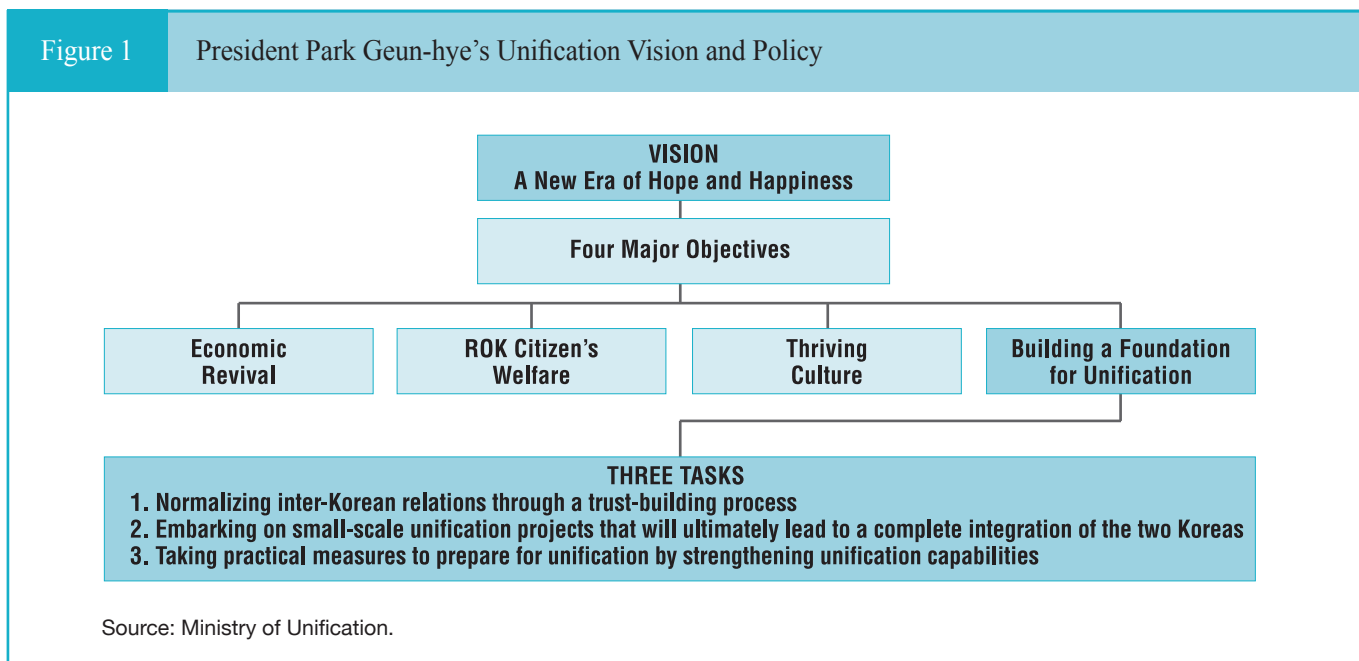
party Coalition for the Future, visited Pyongyang and had a private meeting with the late North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. This demonstrates that unification is one of her top priorities. In fact, President Park clarifies that building a foundation for national unification is one of the four major objectives of her government.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the Park Geun-hye administration’s unification vision and policy through President Park’s public speeches and official documents published by the South Korean government. The Park administration’s unification vision is then assessed in comparison with the unification policies of past governments. Lastly, the paper concludes with suggestions for the Park administration’s unification vision and policy.

The System and Contents of President Park’s Unification Vision and Policy

Under the grand vision of “A New Era of Hope and Happiness,” President Park proposes four major national objectives: economic revival, ROK citizen’s welfare, thriving culture, and building a foundation for unification. In her inauguration speech, President Park said that “I intend to lay the groundwork for an era of harmonious unification where all Koreans can lead more prosperous and freer lives and where their dreams can come true.”

As noted with the three tasks in Figure 1, President Park’s unification policy is based on a gradual and peaceful approach. Therefore, it is clear that President Park furthers President Noh Tae-woo and the following administrations’



unification formula, so-called “Unification Plan for One National Community.” The three-stage unification plan is designed to reach unification after going through reconciliation and cooperation as a first stage and Confederation as a second stage.

Basic Perceptions

From Small Unification to Big Unification

The Park administration pursues unification step-by-step. With steady development in small-scale unification wherein the people of North and South Korea are united as one economically and culturally, she believes that Koreans will be able to take gradual steps toward large-scale unification, specifically political and institutional integration.

In this regard, President Park announced the DMZ World Peace Park initiative in her speech to the joint session of the U.S. Congress on 8 May 2013. She proposed that an international park be created inside the DMZ where peace and trust can grow and both Koreans and citizens of the world can meet in peace. Creating a space for “small unification” where all Koreans can be brought together within the DMZ, the greatest symbol of inter-Korean division and conflict, will provide South and North Koreans with opportunities to bridge cultural differences and open their minds to each other, thereby serving as a starting point towards “big unification.”

President Park again proposed to the North the creation of the DMZ World Peace Park in her speech commemorating the 68th anniversary of Korea’s liberation from Japanese rule on 15 August 2013. President Park presented the need for a new start for making the DMZ a zone of peace where the memories of war and threats of provocations that linger in the Korean psyche can be done away with once and for all, and the peninsula can become an area of trust, harmony, and cooperation. Her vision for the DMZ is to see it transformed, so that the weapons disappear, one small area at a time, until the entire place becomes one where peace and trust can grow. If the two sides that once pointed guns at each other were to come together in agreement to create a peace park in accordance with international norms and procedures, this would be the very starting point for peace and unification on the Korean Peninsula.

Such a gradual approach toward unification was confirmed once again in her Dresden declaration on 28 March 2014. President Park emphasized the need to broaden exchanges and cooperation between North and South Korea prior to unification by mentioning three urgent agendas for humanity, co-prosperity and integration.

Unification Bonanza

Unification is a national goal that, if achieved, will end long years of division and bring happiness to the Korean Peninsula. It is the hope of all Koreans, too. However, negative opinions exist as well claiming that unification will be too costly or not necessary.

In her presidential press conference on 6 January 2014, President Park Geun-hye drew up a blueprint for the reunification of the two Koreas, describing it as a huge opportunity for the South Korean economy to leapfrog to a whole new level. She said that “Unification is *daebak* (bonanza). Some Koreans oppose unification for fear the costs would be too high. But I believe unification would be a chance for the economy to make a huge leap.” She cited investment guru and commentator Jim Rogers, who has repeatedly expressed his willingness to invest in North Korea on the upbeat outlook that unification will be realized in the near future and a unified Korea will emerge as one of the strongest economies in the 21st century.

It is very likely that the Korean Peninsula will make great strides following unification. The South Korean economy will grow considerably. North Korea too will develop rapidly. In addition, as a new logistical hub connecting the Pacific and Eurasia, a unified Korea will contribute to world economic development. As part of her effort to make unification a reality, President Park launched the Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation on 15 July 2014, which will create and propose the agenda for unification.

Major Contents of Three Tasks

Normalizing Inter-Korean Relations Through a Trust-Building Process

Trustpolitik is President Park’s signature foreign affairs principle. The Park administration stresses building trust between Pyongyang and Seoul to manage peace and improve inter-Korean relations. In the short run, her government plans to attempt to strengthen deterrence and security while trying to normalize inter-Korean relations and to achieve durable peace on the Korean Peninsula in the medium-long run. In order to carry out the task, the Park administration focuses on the following four projects.

- **Resolving humanitarian issues:** When providing ‘pure’ humanitarian assistance to the vulnerable groups in North Korea, including infants and pregnant women, the South Korean government will work closely with international organizations to decide the appropriate time and method of assistance regardless of the political circumstances and security situation on the

Korean Peninsula. The government is determined to solve the issues pertaining to the separated families, prisoners of war, and abductees.

- **Adhering to the existing agreements and creating dialogue channels:** The Park administration places top priority on national security. Based on this principle, the ROK government will decide whether or not to resume inter-Korean dialogue and attempt to settle North Korean nuclear issues. In order to solve such pending issues on the Korean Peninsula, the Park administration will carefully consider the shifting international circumstances and North Korea's behavior and act accordingly. The South Korean government takes the position that all agreements signed between Seoul and Pyongyang must be fulfilled by both parties and any additional agreements should only be considered when both Seoul and Pyongyang carry out the existing agreements.
- **Promoting reciprocal inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation:** The South Korean government will carefully examine North Korea's nuclear development and take it into consideration when deciding whether or not to internationalize the Gaeseong Industrial Complex and promote economic, social and cultural exchanges, and cooperation between North and South Korea. The ROK government will establish the Inter-Korean Exchanges and Cooperation Office in Seoul and Pyongyang only when the conditions are met. The ROK government will initiate the *Vision Korea Project* when trust is restored between North and South Korea and when there is progress in denuclearization of North Korea.
- **Confidence building and promoting mutual exchanges and cooperation between North and South Korea:** The Park administration will first attempt to terminate North Korea's military provocations and then move toward building trust in the areas of the military and politics and promoting reciprocal exchanges and cooperation between the two Koreas.

Embarking on Small-Scale Unification Projects That Will Ultimately Lead to a Complete Integration of the Two Koreas

The Park administration emphasizes building a foundation for a unification era that ensures everyone's happiness by re-establishing the vision for a unified Korea and creating economic and green communities. Four projects are outlined for this task.

- **Creating a green community through a *Green Détente*:** When there is progress in denuclearization of North Korea, the ROK government will embark on an inter-Korean environment project with an aim to build a joint green community. The joint environment project will seek to promote green economy, conduct joint research on the ecology of the DMZ, Mt. Baekdu and contiguous regions, and build a new renewable energy complex within the Gaeseong Industrial Complex.
- **Paving a path towards an era of unification that ensures everyone's happiness:** The Park administration will strive to create favorable conditions for the enactment of the North Korean Human Rights Law both at home and abroad. The ROK government will work closely with civil organizations and the international community when seeking ways to improve the lives of the North Korean people and pursuing humanitarian cooperation with North Korea.
- **Launching the *Vision Korea Project*:** When trust is restored between Seoul and Pyongyang and North Korea makes visible progress in denuclearization, the ROK government will build an inter-Korean economic community by launching the 'Vision Korea Project.' In the medium to long term, the Park administration will consider developing industrial infrastructure such as railways, roads, electricity, and information communication.
- **Embracing and refining the *Unification Plan for One National Community*:** The Park administration will promote public discourse on how to embrace and refine the *Unification Plan for One National Community*. The ROK government will respect the national consensus on this issue and consider various options by carefully examining citizens' voices expressed in public hearings and academic papers.

Taking Practical Measures to Prepare for Unification by Strengthening Unification Capabilities

The Park administration stresses the importance of raising public awareness of the need to prepare for unification both at home and abroad. In order to reinforce unification capabilities, the ROK government focuses on building a national consensus on unification and North Korea policy, and obtaining support from the international community. In terms of reinforcing unification preparation, the ROK government strives to expand the scope of human resources, finances, and institutions. The three projects highlighted to fulfill this task are:

- **Improving the customized program for North Korean refugees' resettlement:** The ROK government will reinforce the existing medical support system for North Korean refugees and provide personalized education tailored by age group. The Park administration will advance the re-education system and provide concentrated education to young people so they can obtain economic independence in South Korean society. The Park administration will open the *Cultural Center for North Korean Refugees* with an aim to help them become integral agents and leaders in realizing peaceful national unification. This center will serve as a communication hub for North Korean refugees.
- **Reinforcing capabilities for practical unification preparation:** The ROK government will improve the cooperation channels so relevant organizations can effectively communicate with each other. The Park administration will consider enacting a law that secures necessary finances for unification and build a cooperation system to boost cooperation among research institutes both at home and abroad. The ROK government will also strive to develop balanced education contents.
- **Forming a consensus on unification in the international community through unification diplomacy:** The ROK government will launch and operate a '1.5 track consultative group' in cooperation with civil organizations. The 1.5 track will target neighboring countries. The Park administration will also promote the *One National Unification Network Project* with an aim to raise awareness of the need to prepare for unification among Korean expatriates.

Review of Past Administrations' Unification Vision and Policy

Unification has been a long cherished wish of the South Korean government, but it looked like a dream that would not come true. However, Germany's unification in 1990 was a wake-up call to Koreans and helped them to realize that unification is indeed possible. Unification has become a wish that is realistic and a dream that can be achieved. It was the most precious and positive lesson that the German unification brought to the Korean people.

In 1990 when German unification occurred, South Korea was administered by President Noh Tae-woo. President Noh presented "Nordpolitik" as his foreign policy principle and reached out to socialist countries and traditional allies of North Korea. He also tried normalization of relations with North Korea through the so called "July 7 declaration" in 1988. North Korea was not a simple enemy anymore and even the North

was defined as a partner for unification. For the first time since the end of the Korean War, economic cooperation with North Korea became legalized and contacts between the two Koreas were made in various fields. In September 1989, President Noh announced *Unification Plan for One National Community* during his address to the National Assembly. As an origin of the current government's unification approach, the plan sought to achieve unification gradually through increased exchanges and cooperation.

The Inter-Korean Basic Agreement was signed between South and North Korea in 1991. The agreement defined inter-Korean relations as "not being a relationship between states but a special interim relationship stemming from the process towards unification." Acknowledging that unification could not be achieved any time soon, the two Koreas agreed to respect one another with formal recognition. They also agreed to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, no efforts of insurrection against one another and no military provocation. In addition, South and North Korea concurred to seek unification gradually by recovering national homogeneity through exchanges and cooperation. Even though unification was seen as down to earth after the German unification, the Noh administration's inter-Korean policy was more focused on exchanges and cooperation rather than unification itself.

During the Kim Young-sam administration, unification talks were mainly focused on absorption. In the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, North Korea was hit hard by the collapse of the socialist bloc and lost its ground in international political and economic relations. The North Korean leader Kim Il-sung who had ruled the country for decades died suddenly in 1994. To make matters worse, because of an unprecedented severe 100 year flood, North Korea was in a dire economic situation. In addition, facing cold weather damage and drought in the following years, North Korea entered the "arduous march" where several hundred thousand North Koreans died of famine.

The Kim Young-sam administration assessed that North Korea would collapse in the not too distant future. In fact, President Kim described the North as a 'malfunctioning airplane' during his interview with a Japanese newspaper in June 1996. According to his diagnosis, there was nothing for the South Korean government to do to achieve unification. His administration would wait to absorb North Korea upon its collapse. With this background, Kim's unification vision naturally led to absorption of North Korea and all relevant details and specific plans had to be prepared focusing on this merge. The substance of Kim's unification vision had nothing to do with the *Unification Formula for the Korean National Community* that the Kim administration promoted outwardly. As the name of the formula indicates, it was tweaked from President Noh Tae-woo's *Unification Plan for One National Community* that pursued gradual and peaceful unification.

However, North Korea did not fall down. Actually, the Kim Dae-jung administration, inaugurated in 1998, did not want North Korea to collapse. One of the Kim Dae-jung administration's three major principles was to exclude discourse on unification by absorption. Actually, he prohibited unification discussion knowing that it would lead to absorption and therefore arouse North Korea's anger.

Alternatively, the Kim Dae-jung administration chose the so-called 'Sunshine Policy' which focused on exchanges and cooperation with a belief that interaction and economic assistance would change North Korea's attitude. After the historic inter-Korean summit in 2000, the first ever since the end of the Korean War, more active exchanges and cooperation were emphasized rather than unification itself. Mt. Geumgang tourism and the Gaeseong Industrial Complex project, symbols of inter-Korean economic cooperation, were launched under the auspices of the Kim Dae-jung's administration. His government provided an enormous amount of aid each year, ignoring criticism from the conservatives that South Korea gave too much for nothing. The Roh Moo-hyun administration carried forth Kim Dae-jung's unification policy with almost no changes. There were almost no talks about unification, but rather talks about exchanges and cooperation only.

After ten years of the two liberal and progressive leaders' control, President Lee Myung-bak took office in 2008. Even though Lee was from the conservative circle, he was active in inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation in the beginning. His administration suggested a slogan "Stick to the principle, but approach flexibly." It sounded like a balanced policy toward North Korea between principle and flexibility. However, looking more closely based on Lee's subsequent words and deeds, it turned out that flexibility was emphasized more. He reiterated that inter-Korean relations should be assessed not by ideology but by pragmatism. He showed his strong willingness to bring about a robust and high performance in inter-Korean relations.

However, a series of unfortunate accidents ensued. First, on 30 May 2008, North Korea fired three short distance missiles from the West Sea. On 11 July 2008, a South Korean tourist to Mt. Geumgang was shot dead by a North Korean soldier and Mt. Geumgang business was halted. In the following year on 30 March, a Hyundai Asan staff member was detained for more than 130 days, and on 5 April 2009, North Korea tested a long-range missile *Gwangmyeong II*. As a highlight of continuing provocations from the North, on 26 March 2010, the South Korean navy ship *Cheonan* sank by a North Korean torpedo and 46 seamen were killed. The Lee administration had to halt all inter-Korean economic exchanges and cooperation except the Gaeseong Industrial Complex. This counter-measure, "the May 24 sanctions," is still in effect.

If we divide the South Korean governments' North Korea policies into two categories—one, exchanges and cooperation policy reflecting today's divided situation, and the other, unification policy wishing for tomorrow's unified peninsula—the Lee administration could not help but choose the latter because all activities for exchanges and cooperation were halted due to the sanctions he imposed. In addition, the possibility of North Korea's collapse was raised again due to the deteriorating health condition of Kim Jong-il. In his address for the Korean Liberation Day ceremony on 15 August 2010, President Lee suggested creating a 'unification tax' saying "unification would come unexpectedly like a thief in the middle of the night." It was one of the most specific unification plans among all other proposals that his predecessors presented.

Assessment and Suggestions

President Park's unification vision is desirable in that her administration is taking a balanced approach between unification and exchanges and cooperation. Her remarks such as "building trust step-by-step" and "from small unification to big unification" can be interpreted as emphasizing their importance in a pre-stage of unification. However, it does not mean that President Park considers unification as a minor task or a task on the back burner.

President Park's interest and dedication toward unification can be easily identified in her active role in forming the Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation. She decided to serve as the head of the committee and has been playing an active role by administering all six committee meetings and proposing the unification agenda by herself. It clearly shows that the Park administration considers unification as a task that should be pursued concurrently with a policy of exchanges and cooperation. In fact, President Park has asked the members of the Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation to come up with inter-Korean business items contributing to the promotion of exchanges and cooperation. She added that finding and implementing those projects should be the number one task for the committee.

As previously mentioned, Park's approach toward unification is quite positive given that past administrations took a lopsided approach either toward exchanges and cooperation or toward unification. Unification and exchanges and cooperation are two sides of the same coin. A desirable unification comes as a result of expanded exchanges and cooperation, and unification without sufficient exchanges and cooperation could be a disaster rather than a blessing.

Another positive aspect of President Park's unification vision is her approach in terms of benefit rather than cost. Most previous governments formed their unification policies with reference to cost only and President Lee Myung-bak's unification tax was

an exemplary case of such an approach. It resulted in a lowered level of national consensus on unification as it made Koreans feel that unification required an enormous cost and they should sacrifice themselves to bear the burden. Unification bonanza, the term President Park used during her press conference, demonstrates how her unification policy is different from ones of her predecessors. By approaching it in respect to benefits, she emphasizes the positive results that unification provides the nation. Such out-of-the-box thinking is expected to reduce Korean indifference, ignorance, and negative perception of unification. It helps Koreans associate benefit rather than cost when it comes to unification in economic terms.

There is also negative assessment of Park’s unification vision. Paradoxically, President Park’s unification bonanza may worsen inter-Korean relations as the bonanza could apply only to South Koreans, leading to total loss or disaster for North Koreans. As there is a saying “it takes two to tango,” unification must be worked on together. Park’s unification team should have been more cautious in choosing terminology, looking for words and terms that sound pleasant to North Korea as well.

It is also uncertain that unification is a bonanza to other countries that have stakes on the Korean Peninsula. Even though the U.S., China, and Japan assert that they support a unified Korea, it is still possible that the status quo could serve their national interests politically, economically, and militarily. Before the Park administration asserts unification bonanza, her foreign affairs team should have coordinated more closely with neighboring countries and have worked harder to persuade them that Korea’s unification is positively linked to their interest. If unification is a bonanza only to South Korea, no country will support unification of the peninsula.

Another criticism is that it may not be appropriate to speak out on unification when even rudimentary official dialogue has been blocked. It is clear that the Park administration is pursuing gradual and peaceful unification—not an abrupt and forceful one. Then, resuming dialogue should be a top priority task.

Economic theory says that unification is a sum of three parts: development, transition, and integration. Once unification is achieved on the Korean Peninsula, the North Korean economy must be developed because of the huge economic gap between the North and the South. Transition of the North Korean from a planned, socialist economy to capitalist, market based system is another important task. Integration of the two economies is inevitable and essential.

German unification tackled these three tasks at the same time, leading to tremendous cost and trouble for Germany. In the Korean case, the situation could be much worse since the North

Table 1		The Most Concerning Issue During the Process of Unification	
Category			%
Enormous unification cost			43.2
Social instability such as increasing unemployment, crimes, etc.			25.3
Political and military instability			15.2
Mass immigration of North Koreans into South Korea			12.5
Disorientation of foreign policy			3.6
None			0.2
Total			100.0

Source: Korea Broadcasting System, 2014 National Survey on View of Unification, 2014, p. 35.

Korean economy is much less developed than the former East Germany and the South Korean economy is much smaller than the former West Germany. Thus, it would be better for the North Korean economy to develop and transition to a considerable extent before unification. In other words, we have to focus on opening and reforming the North Korean economy through exchanges and cooperation before going directly to unification.

Indeed, South Koreans support an engagement policy which promotes exchanges and cooperation. According to a KBS survey on South Koreans’ view of unification conducted in August 2014, the most concerning issue in regards to unification was the enormous cost. It implies that policies to reduce unification cost should be implemented first before unification itself. Again, the South Korean government needs to pursue development and transition of the North Korean economy prior to integration of the two economies. If the Park administration keeps this implication in mind, it could leave the greatest legacy for future generations on the Peninsula.

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