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ASIA'S SLIPPERY SLOPE: TRIANGULAR  
TENSIONS, IDENTITY GAPS,  
CONFLICTING REGIONALISM, AND  
DIPLOMATIC IMPASSE TOWARD  
NORTH KOREA

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NEW THINKING ON DIPLOMACY  
TOWARD NORTH KOREA



# South Korea's Search for a New Diplomatic Strategy Toward North Korea: Trustpolitik as a Goldilocks Approach?

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With the North Korean nuclear threat still lingering, the international community's decades-long effort to bring about peaceful denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was in vain. Although there were only a few optimistic moments for establishing a peace regime on the peninsula, no such mechanism has been created thus far. The Six-Party Talks' last push for a permanent peace regime in late 2007, which was facilitated by the September 19 Joint Statement and the February 13 Joint Agreement, was as close as we could come. Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy of engagement, Roh Moo-hyun's unreserved outreach to North Korea, and Lee Myung-bak's stern response to the North's nuclear program and provocations all proved to be fruitless to induce changes in North Korea. There seems to be no escape from the treacherous repetitive patterns in dealing with Pyongyang. This is the sobering legacy that Park Geun-hye inherited from her predecessors.

Park had to begin her presidency facing harsh realities. Even before she took office in late February 2013, North Korea launched a series of provocative actions: its third nuclear test, another missile test, withdrawal from the 1953 armistice and the non-aggression pact with the South, severance of the North-South military hotline, closure of the Kaeseong industrial complex, massive cyber-attacks, and numerous rhetorical threats. In September, the factories at Kaeseong restarted operations, and Pyongyang made several conciliatory gestures, including resumption of the reunion program for families separated by the Korean War amid talk of re-opening tours at Mt. Kumgang for South Koreans that stopped in 2008 when a South Korean tourist was shot by a North Korean soldier. However, the North abruptly canceled plans for the reunions, blaming the conservatives in the South for "throwing obstacles" in the inter-Korean reconciliatory process.<sup>1</sup> A more surprising development unfolded in early December 2013, when Jang Sung-taek, uncle of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, who was second-in-command, was suddenly arrested and later reportedly executed. The year ended with the lowest expectations for inter-Korean relations.

Beginning the year 2014, Kim Jong-un called for creating "an atmosphere of reconciliation and unity" on the peninsula. Seoul replied that it wanted to see action not rhetoric and stated that family reunions would be a first step for forging inter-Korean reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> On February 12, the first high-level talks in seven years were held at the truce village of Panmunjom, with family reunions, South Korea-U.S. military exercises, and tours of Mt. Kumgang on the agenda; however, Pyongyang demanded that Seoul postpone joint military drills with the United States as a precondition for the reunions. Seoul refused, claiming that the humanitarian agenda should not be linked to military issues. Later, both sides agreed that they would suspend hostile rhetoric toward each other and resume the reunions despite the upcoming joint exercise. Yet, on March 25, North Korea launched two medium-range ballistic missiles. It also harshly criticized Park's "Dresden Declaration" of March 28 on taking Germany's unity as an example and model for a peaceful reunification of the peninsula and laying the groundwork for reunification through economic and cultural exchanges and humanitarian aid as the "psychopath's daydream" and "bits of useless junk."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, inter-Korean relations have long been a seesaw, with North Korea's repetitive cycle of provocations followed by weak international sanctions and its conciliatory initiatives that often ended abruptly with little progress.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the strained relationship with North Korea during the first months after her inauguration in 2013, Park pursued "Hanbando shinroe" (Korea Peninsula trust-building process), putting

emphasis on the importance of maintaining dialogue, honoring every promise that has already been made, and abiding by international norms. “Trustpolitik” is known to be an expression of Park’s philosophy based on historical experience that sustainable cooperation among states requires both trust and awareness of the realities of the peninsula and Northeast Asia. In addition, the “*Dongbuka pyonghwa gusang*” (Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative: NAPCI) was proposed as a roadmap to carry out trustpolitik at the regional level and shift from current mistrust and rivalry driven by “Asia’s Paradox” (strengthening regional economic interdependence, which is offset by an escalation in territorial and historical disputes) into a new structure of trust-based cooperation and sustainable peace in the region.<sup>5</sup> The Park administration has emphasized the difference between NAPCI and previous Northeast Asia initiatives that were proposed since President Roh Tae-woo in the late 1980s, stating that NAPCI intends to promote a culture of regional cooperation through building trust and aims to accumulate habits and practices of dialogue and cooperation starting with soft security issues.<sup>6</sup>

Park’s approach has induced no real change in de facto nuclear North Korea. In fact, the North’s pacifying gestures in 2014 (although it still fired missiles and slammed Park’s reunification speech in March) compared to 2013 seem not to be drawn from Park’s “resolute and principled” management, but are more closely related to the North Korean domestic situation. In 2013, the second year of his reign, Kim Jong-un seemed to be desperate to achieve real discernible results so as to legitimize the third generation of the Kim family’s dynastic rule. Because of this internal situation, Park had difficulties in pursuing her North Korean policy. As quoted in a *Daily NK* interview with a North Korean expert, “North Korea may respond better to South Korean policy changes in 2014 as it aims to improve relations with the U.S. and China.”<sup>7</sup> Recently, Pyongyang has pursued the strategy of “*Tongnam Tongmi*” (setting up a relationship with the United States through enhancing its relationship with South Korea) instead of the long-held strategy of “*Tongmi Bongnam*” (trying to set up a relationship with the United States while insulting and refusing a relationship with South Korea).<sup>8</sup>

Against this backdrop, this chapter evaluates Park’s North Korean policy through the lens of both checkered inter-Korean relations and complex regional settings. She advocated trustpolitik as an approach to assume “a tough line against North Korea sometimes, and a flexible policy open to negotiations other times.” It has the appearance of a “Goldilocks approach,” a middle-of-the-road policy, taking no aggressive actions and not being too passive or too generous, which is similar to what many say about Obama’s foreign policy.<sup>9</sup> Park’s administration appears to have taken lessons from ineffective policies of her predecessors, whether a progressive Sunshine Policy or Lee Myong-bak’s frosty responses to North Korea’s “bad behavior” which did not lead to peace and security on the peninsula.

After more than one year of promotional efforts, however, Park’s catchphrases of trustpolitik and NAPCI still suffer conceptual vagueness and lack tangible policy guidelines. The essence of trustpolitik is subject to some interpretation and criticism for not yet having much perceptible content. Also, Park’s Goldilocks approach is subject to criticism, as is Obama’s, as unable to take any decisive move in either direction. The challenging regional security situation limits Seoul’s strategic freedom of action, making its North Korean policy reactive, rather than proactive, and heavily affected by the great powers and Pyongyang’s precarious actions, which, as earlier in the nuclear crisis, often proved to be beyond a South Korean president’s grasp.<sup>10</sup>

## TRUSTPOLITIK AS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND A POLICY TOOL

Since Park Geun-hye first introduced the basics of trustpolitik in her article in *Foreign Affairs*, “A New Kind of Korea: Building Trust between Seoul and Pyongyang,” in the fall of 2011, it has been perceived by many as a rather ambiguous policy concept.<sup>11</sup> With the launch of her regime, the South Korean foreign policy elite, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), has been diligently explaining the meaning and significance of this concept and converting it into a workable policy platform, making ever more detailed policy explanations. According to Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se, trustpolitik is a vision, philosophy, and policy by which South Korea, as a responsible middle power, can pursue the Korean Peninsula trust-building process and NAPCI.<sup>12</sup> This catchword appears to presuppose a philosophically driven policy initiative that is to encompass inter-Korean and regional affairs all together.

As the name itself suggests, “trust” is the core concept of trustpolitik. Nations, as individuals, need to trust each other in order to cooperate together. Though it may sound simple and almost self-evident, this is exactly where contending theoretical paradigms of international politics differ in their perspectives and prescriptions. Realists are inclined to see the notion of building trust among nations as either impossible or implausible, whereas liberals tend to embrace it as both feasible and desirable. Minister Yun argues that trustpolitik is “neither a utopian idealism that shies away from realpolitik nor a naïve political romanticism.”<sup>13</sup>

To those who advocate trustpolitik, Park’s North Korean policy is a reasonable combination of carrots and sticks. They evaluate the normalization of the Kaeseong industrial complex after a five-month shutdown by the North as a tangible outcome of Park’s new policy that sticks to a consistent stance, urging Pyongyang to respect international standards and norms and abide by its promises, or otherwise pay a penalty for broken promises, which is the key element of trustpolitik. It also demonstrates the possibility of a paradigm shift in inter-Korean relations because it marks the first time that Seoul has departed from its past practice of either easily accepting or helplessly enduring North Korea’s self-indulgent behavior. Meanwhile, Seoul’s decision to allow humanitarian assistance to North Korea via international organizations such as UNICEF is also in line with one of the central tenets of trustpolitik. The policy supports the provision of assistance to the most vulnerable North Koreans, such as infants and pregnant women, regardless of the political situation between the two Koreas.<sup>14</sup>

As far as the policy nametag is concerned, trustpolitik seems to echo Roh Tae-woo’s opportune and fairly effective stratagem of nordpolitik; however, the two initiatives are readily distinguishable. While nordpolitik mainly focused on geopolitically and diplomatically encircling North Korea by taking advantage of the dissolution of the communist bloc in the late 1980s and early 1990s, trustpolitik aims at laying a solid foundation for meaningful inter-Korean rapprochement as well as regional cooperation. Also, interestingly, there appears to be no geopolitical notion or regional focus in trustpolitik. Instead, it is to emphasize strong philosophical principles that demonstrate South Korea’s superior moral ground. This is quite a departure from her predecessors’ rather grandiose diplomatic slogans.

| <b>Table 1. Comparison of South Korea's Successive Governments' Regional Initiatives</b> |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Presidents</b>  | <b>Initiatives</b>  | <b>Major Characteristics</b>   |
| Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993)  | Nordpolitik   | Opening to the former communist countries and initiatives for inter-Korean reconciliation  |
| Kim Young-sam (1993-1998)  | Globalization   | Advancing outreach to East Asia and the rest of the world, with aims to have a positive spillover effect on North Korea  |
| Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003)   | East Asia Initiative  | Taking initiative in the East Asian community building process (e.g. East Asia Vision Group, East Asia Study Group), seeking cooperation on traditional security issues, and employing a top-down approach based on political agreements between heads of states   |
| Roh Moo-hyun (2003-008)  | Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative                        | Establishing Northeast Asia security and economic communities that include regional cooperation on non-traditional security agendas, and seeking a "balancing" role in international relations in Northeast Asia.  |
| Lee Myung-bak (2008-2012)  | Creative, Pragmatic Diplomacy                                 | Strengthening relations with key regional powers, promoting conditional engagement with North Korea, and enhancing Korea's role in the international community   |
| Park Geun-hye (2013-present)   | Trustpolitik; Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative | Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative. Building trust between the two Koreas by striking a balance between sternness and flexibility, focusing on consistent international alliances against North Korea (especially for the dismantlement of the North's nuclear program), promoting a culture of regional cooperation grounded in trust, accumulating practices and habits of dialogue and cooperation starting with softer issues, and building trust through concrete cooperation projects |

In retrospect, during the Cold War period, Korea tried to develop its strategic thought toward regionalism, although it was somewhat restrained and distorted. Based on the firm bilateral alliance structure with the United States, Korean diplomatic leverage and choices were limited in the region's multilateral process. Its regional strategy was distorted to some extent because the primary objective of its foreign policy was to gain relative predominance over North Korea in ideological, political, diplomatic, and economic terms. Post-Cold War efforts of regional cooperation among Northeast Asian countries have produced mixed outcomes, or what Park called "Asia's paradox," with growing economic interdependence but little political and security cooperation. This reflects the fact that the functionalist approach does



not work well in advancing the regional integration process in this region. Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun advocated “open regionalism,” assuring that Northeast Asian regional cooperation will not be exclusive and discriminatory against countries outside the region, but rather play a catalytic role for broader regional cooperation, which embraces the rest of the region.<sup>15</sup> Yet, their respective regional strategies were considered to be an inward-looking protectionist approach in economic terms, as well as heavily associated with their North Korean policies.<sup>16</sup>

During Lee Myung-bak’s administration, dealing with U.S. attitudes toward multilateral initiatives such as ASEAN + 3 and the East Asian Summit (EAS), which did not include the United States, was an arduous concern in strategic planning to develop regional cooperation. As Washington expressed its continued reservations about evolving East Asia regionalism, it was difficult for Seoul to disregard its views because of the geopolitical reality in and around the peninsula. Lee was eager to promote “greater Asian diplomacy,” through the expansion of an Asian cooperative network based on open regionalism. His pledge for reconciliation with Japan on the basis of trilateral cooperation involving the United States was an important step toward regional cooperation, although his proposal did not come to fruition. Lee’s so-called creative, pragmatic diplomacy gave priority to strengthening the U.S. strategic alliance, emphasizing its usefulness for Korea’s national interest, and his strategic thinking on regionalism could not be developed at the cost of Seoul’s relationship with Washington.<sup>17</sup>

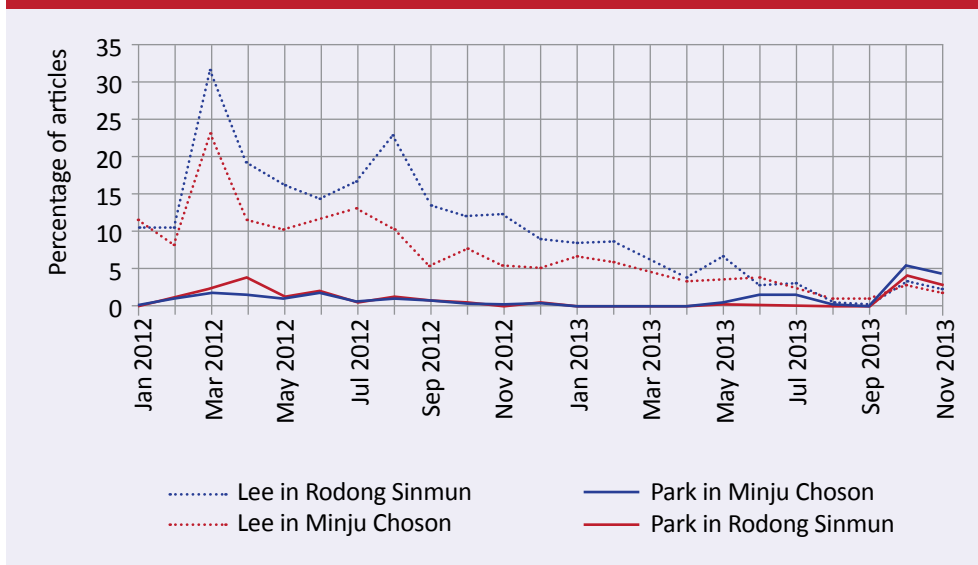
In comparison, Park has sought a “G-2” strategy of balanced and harmonious relations with both the United States and China. While retaining South Korea’s traditional alliance, Park is attempting to develop a strategic partnership with China in dealing with the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and trade. Her administration claims that successful summits with both countries were possible due to a mutual sense of trust between the leaders.<sup>18</sup> How South Korea, a middle power, can position itself well to secure its national interests in the face of the rivalry between giant powers is a thorny task. As U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden in his visit to Korea in December 2013 stated, “Betting on the opposite side of the United States would not be a great bet.” Noticing Seoul’s growing ties with Beijing, he may be reminding the Park administration that it wants Korea’s support in Washington’s rebalancing foreign policy.<sup>19</sup> Given this reality, Park’s NAPCI attempts to reflect on the lessons learned from the previous administrations’ struggles for regional initiatives by emphasizing the importance of making cooperation projects and dialogues executable and achievable.<sup>20</sup>

As for the perception of Pyongyang toward South Korean presidents, it seems to have been less critical of Park than Lee. According to a preliminary study on North Korea’s media content by Martin Weiser,<sup>21</sup> peaks in references to Lee in March and July/August 2012 coincided with military exercises that began in March and August and the celebration of the end of the Korean War. Despite the fierce rhetoric in the spring of 2013 and the numerous references to the Korean War in August, references to Park remained less frequent. This trend in the coverage of South Korean presidents started in mid-2012, before Park took office, and might point at North Korea’s willingness to engage the South after only a few months of vitriol following the death of Kim Jong-il. This shows that the third nuclear crisis was linked by North Korea more to the United States while paying less attention to Seoul for a stern response by the UN. Still, North Korea closed the Kaeseong complex at the beginning of April, not long after the war rhetoric rose sharply in March (See Figure 1).

North Korean media paid virtually no attention to Park after her inauguration in February 2013 and started to mention her more frequently only in the cabinet's newspaper *Minju Choson* in June and July, dropping again in August. *Rodong Sinmun*, which has a broader domestic audience as the party's newspaper, included surprisingly few references to her. Having criticized Lee immediately after his election, it took a "wait and see" attitude in the case of Park. As South Korean-U.S.-Japanese joint naval drills involving a U.S. aircraft carrier in South Korean waters heightened tensions with North Korea in October, references to Park increased; however, Pyongyang clearly was less critical of her (See Figure 1).

This lesser attention given to Park in North Korean media may not be a surprise, given the fact that Lee clearly took a harder line with the North, a policy the United States supported at that time, and given Park's "middle of the road policy." Yet, Pyongyang's response has been less unforgiving even when Park clearly rejected the North's requests, such as holding the family reunions only after cancelling the Foal Eagle exercises. Arguably, Pyongyang's reaction to Park is somewhat related to North Korea's memory of her father Park Chung-hee's statement of July 4, 1970 that led to an agreement with North Korean leader Kim Il-sung, grandfather of Kim Jong-un, as well as to her 2002 visit to Pyongyang to meet Kim Jong-il, father of Kim Jong-un. In addition, after a series of violent provocations and threats until the first half of 2013, Pyongyang seemed to employ conciliatory gestures and policies in order to go forward with diplomatic engagement with Seoul, and ultimately with Washington, which is known as the policy of "Tongnam Tongmi." In February 2014, the two Koreas held reunions of families separated by the Korean War, despite the Korea-U.S. joint military exercise. Initially, the North demanded a delay in joint military drills until after the reunion finished, but the South refused and, in a very rare concession, the North agreed to hold the family reunions as scheduled. This raised hopes for improved inter-Korean relations, but Pyongyang has increased tensions again by testing short-range ballistic missiles and rockets and rejected Seoul's proposal to hold Red Cross talks to discuss arranging more

**Figure 1. North Korean Media Analysis: References to South Korean Presidents (Jan 2012 to Nov 2013)**



family reunions in March. Recently, the North Korean media have also noticeably raised its criticism against Park, particularly in the wake of the Foal Eagle exercise, a two-month long Korea-U.S. joint military drill aimed at improving combat readiness against North Korea, and Parks' Dresden Proposal.

In brief, trustpolitik, whether as Park's overarching political philosophy or as a policy tool that is applicable both to inter-Korean relations and international diplomacy, is based on the hope of establishing a community in which members feel a sense of trustworthiness with each other. In implementing trustpolitik since she came to office, Park has diligently explained her political viewpoint related to NAPCI to other countries. She claimed that the trust-building process on the peninsula and NAPCI are mutually reinforcing since the regional objectives of peaceful cooperation are to increase common interest and trust between the states involved, to offer opportunities for sustained dialogue and shared norms to facilitate one country's understanding of and predictability about another state's actions, and ultimately to foster a favorable environment for peaceful unification of the two Koreas. NAPCI is also considered a useful means to indirectly send a strong message to North Korea that the international community will respond to any military provocation.<sup>22</sup>

Still, the Cold War structure in Northeast Asia remains. As the existing bilateral security system is pivotal to regional peace and stability, the multilateral regional security system should serve as a complement to the current bilateral structure. Given a clear lack of inter-state trust due to historical animosity, geopolitical complexity, and competitive military build-ups, Park's emphasis on trust among nations is not only pertinent but also imperative to regional peace and security. However, given the realist assumption that nations have no eternal friends or enemies but only have permanent national interests in international relations, promoting a regional sense of sustainable trust among states, as well as managing inter-Korean relations based on trust, sounds both naïve and unfeasible. In an opinion poll in February 2014, 71.3 percent of 150 experts on diplomacy and security who responded to the survey said the Korean Peninsula trust-building process has no practical effect.<sup>23</sup>

Park in her NAPCI called for the promotion of multilateral cooperation that begins with less controversial regional common interests such as environmental problems, cross-border crimes, and anti-terrorism. The main objective of NAPCI is to increase the habit of dialogue and cooperation in these soft security sectors, which, in turn, would generate a spillover effect to more sensitive issues such as arms control, alliances, and historical and territorial disputes. Yet, critics argue that it is just an ambiguous goal that lacks concrete and practical ways of implementation.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, a functionalist approach envisioned in NAPCI appears to not be effective in the case of Northeast Asia, where geopolitical complications and urgency prevail, as shown in ongoing Sino-Japanese and Korean-Japanese bilateral tensions that have frustrated trilateral meetings. Strengthening cooperation on softer issues has not effectively generated necessary conditions for regional peace and security. Rather, tensions over "harder" political and military issues have disturbed inter-state functional cooperation already under way. Therefore, confidence-building measures on hard issues through a political breakthrough at the highest level are urgently required to regain a sense of momentum in support of bilateral and multilateral dialogue in the region.

## CHALLENGING SECURITY ENVIRONMENT IN NORTHEAST ASIA

The world has witnessed a power shift in a changing world order, particularly since the 2008 global financial crisis. Northeast Asia seems to be at the forefront of the transition. China's rising economic power is being rapidly converted to formidable military capabilities and diplomatic influence. Japan's push for achieving a normal state is already causing increased friction among the countries in the region. U.S. supremacy in the region is increasingly questionable despite the American diplomatic and military rebalancing to Asia.<sup>25</sup> The economic worries may, to some degree, be fading away, but the geopolitical challenges are intensifying.<sup>26</sup> In South Korea's North Korean policy and regional diplomacy, the complex and uncertain regional background needs to be carefully considered.

### **North Korea: Oscillating Behavior Increases Uncertainty**

Since the death of Kim Jong-il on December 17, 2011, there has been an apparent lack of consistency in North Korea's behavior, recently even less predictable and more puzzling than usual. Last year it took a series of provocative actions and then suddenly went on a "peace offensive." The periodic ups and downs in its rhetoric are now too frequent to discern what it wants, let alone what it truly intends to do. Back in February 2012, there was cautious expectation that the long overdue promises at the Six-Party Talks might be fulfilled step-by-step if the process resumed, as the "Leap Day" deal was reached between the United States and North Korea. North Korea had pledged to allow the IAEA inspectors to assess and monitor the Yongbyon nuclear facilities and suspend nuclear tests as well as long-range missile launches in return for significant U.S. "nutritional assistance."<sup>27</sup> However, the deal was soon nullified by the North's declaration that it would test a "satellite launch vehicle," (SLV), then the actual, if failed, launch, and later a more successful December launch. In February 2013, just a week before Park's inauguration, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test. Perhaps emboldened, Pyongyang threatened nuclear war with not only South Korea but also Japan and the United States. Pyongyang appears not to have the capability to actually carry out an attack on the United States, although it threatened to conduct a preemptive attack against it and South Korea in response to the two allies' agreement of October 2013 on a new strategy for deterring nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) strikes by North Korea.<sup>28</sup> Taking a more positive approach, from July 2013, North Korea appeared conciliatory for a time before turning more belligerent again.

What caused North Korea to zigzag? 1) China's persuasion and pressure? 2) North Korea's own economic necessity? or 3) Kim Jong-un regime's internal power struggle? All three causes are intertwined to make coherent policy implementation more difficult. As evidence of the third argument, one need only cite the shocking news of Jang Sung-taek's purge, in the aftermath of which, the domestic political situation appears even more complex and uncertain. Now North Korea is tightening control over the deeply troubled population because it senses that sympathy for Jang would endanger the regime. Mobilization to denounce Jang's crimes reportedly took place nationwide. On the one hand, Kim Jong-un has frequently visited military installations to show off his strong grip on the military. On the other, Jang's personal network—including his relatives and subordinates in the

party, the cabinet, and affiliated agencies—was arrested. Those in overseas missions were summoned back—all subject to varying severity of punishment from execution to imprisonment, depending on their degree of intimacy with Jang. These developments are indicative of North Korea’s political instability.

In the midst of this purge, Pyongyang relaunched its “peace offensive.” Starting from the New Year’s message, it removed harsh elements from its rhetoric and called for improving inter-Korean relations and reciprocally stopping slander and mudslinging. Since Pyongyang’s “soft” gestures have often been followed by major provocations, discussion about how Seoul should respond was cautious. The North’s tactics appeared to be an attempt to soften its negative image in the United States and elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> Seen in the context of its prior zigzag behavior, the pattern of provocation followed by conciliation is nothing new.

### **Recent Trends among the Surrounding Great Powers**

There is widespread skepticism among U.S. policy elites about North Korea’s credibility after its abrogation of the “Leap Day” deal and the execution of Jang Sung-taek. Few think that conditions are ripe for the resumption of denuclearization talks with North Korea, let alone for its strategic turnabout. The United States will likely continue to put pressure on the North over the nuclear issue while trying to induce China to play a constructive role.<sup>30</sup> Though it is difficult to determine whether Kim Jong-un’s power basis has solidified, the United States continues to keep its eye on the possibility of new North Korean provocations, even as there is mounting impatience for action both in the United States and from its partners in the region.

There is little chance for any U.S. reengagement in bilateral direct negotiations with the North to succeed. After past failed bilateral attempts, it prefers multilateral negotiations. Therefore, it is crucial for Park to strengthen policy coordination with Washington and seek together to develop principles for a multilateral approach. She can be confident now that Washington will not give Pyongyang the impression that it can take advantage of occasional bilateral contacts with the United States to try to drive a wedge between Seoul and it, as was the case at the time of the South Korea-U.S. perception gap (and thus policy gap) over North Korea under South Korea’s progressive governments.<sup>31</sup>

As for China, Beijing is inclined to see the purge of Jang Sung-taek as an internal problem and take a “business as usual” position. Yet, Sino-North Korean economic cooperation is troubled because many Chinese investors reportedly feel uneasy about their prospects since many of their North Korean counterparts—mostly Jang’s surrogates—were either purged or replaced.<sup>32</sup> Also, Beijing seems noticeably irritated with recent developments, wary of losing its leverage over the Pyongyang regime. Over the past few years, China’s awareness of North Korean affairs, especially internal political dynamics, has been found to be deficient, lacking high-level channels with the leadership in Pyongyang.<sup>33</sup> While it is clear that neither Beijing nor Pyongyang wants to damage their traditional relations, the former considers it essential for the latter not to engage in belligerent behavior and worries about the immature nature and unpredictability of Kim Jong-un. Though China expects Kim to stay in power for the foreseeable future, it also predicts a certain degree of political and socio-economic instability to ensue over the course of his power consolidation. Mending relations depends not only on whether Pyongyang exercises self-restraint, but also on how quickly and smoothly Kim finishes the “house-cleaning” within his leadership.



Outside observers are closely observing the following issues in North Korea-China relations: a Kim Jong-un visit to China, North Korean nuclear and missile tests, North Korea's border control with China, the PLA's movements in the vicinity of the border area, Sino-North Korean economic cooperation activities, and Beijing's strategic calculations about Pyongyang. Kim will eventually visit China in restoring the traditional comradeship with his country's only ally in the region, but North Korea is not expected to abandon its tandem strategy of simultaneously pursuing nuclear armaments and economic revitalization under his monolithic leadership.<sup>34</sup> It is, thus, important for Park to continue to keep warm ties with Xi Jinping, coordinating her North Korean policy with him, as well as to urge China, as North Korea's major sponsor, to play a greater role in solving the nuclear issue and involving the international community.

From Japan's perspective, North Korea will experience political instability for some time due to Kim Jong-un's unfinished power consolidation, his arbitrary decision-making style, and the apathetic attitude of his senior subordinates, who are now instinctively preoccupied with self-preservation. At present, there is no reason to believe that Japan has changed its policy, which basically aims to comprehensively resolve the North Korean nuclear and missile problems, as well as the abduction issue by maintaining sanctions and allowing for dialogue. Nevertheless, politicians in Tokyo, especially Abe and those around him, may hope to quickly settle the abduction issue rather than merely participating in the painstakingly slow multilateral process to produce a comprehensive resolution since he pledged to solve it during his term in office. It cannot be ruled out that Japan could try to strike a deal if it were to directly reengage with the Kim Jong-un regime. Abe sent Iijima Isao, a special advisor to the Cabinet Secretary, to Pyongyang in May 2013 to discuss the abduction issue with Kim Yong Nam without careful prior policy consultations with the other Six-Party Talks partners. This visit concerned both Seoul and Washington since any sudden progress in a Pyongyang-Tokyo dialogue would be at odds with the close trilateral coordination on the North Korean issue they have sought. Tokyo's uncoordinated, unilateral approach undercuts hope of making a breakthrough in the dormant Six-Party Talks on the denuclearization of North Korea. The Korean Foreign Ministry openly stated that Iijima's visit was "unhelpful."<sup>35</sup>

Japan's bilateral ties with South Korea and China, respectively, have been strained by the Abe administration's increasingly aggressive and nationalistic posture on historical and territorial issues. Abe's comments about Japan becoming a "normal state," changing its peace Constitution, and revising two standing apologies to its neighbors (the Kono and Murayama statements) undermine Japan's standing in the region.<sup>36</sup> The United States is concerned about the escalating tension between its major allies. North Korea is predictably tempted to take advantage of Japan's unilateral approach in order to drive a wedge between it and its allies. Close consultations with the United States are necessary to urge Japan not to act unilaterally.

As for Russia, Putin's absolute power and keen interest in the development of the Russian Far East have not only put a spotlight on a strategic approach to Pyongyang, but also have led to the pursuit of joint business opportunities in North Korea. Even after Jang's purge, there is no significant sign of a setback to bilateral economic cooperation with North Korea, and Pyongyang reportedly reaffirmed that Russian partners' investments, including those in the Rajin-Khasan joint logistics venture, will not be affected. Although Russian observers say that Kim Jong-un needs more time to complete large-scale follow-up purges and generational

changes in the party, government, and the military, they are positive about the survival of his regime and the health of the bilateral relationship between North Korea and Russia.<sup>37</sup> Since North Korea is likely to increase contacts with the Russian side in order to reconfigure the old northern triangle of North Korea, China, and Russia, there is a possibility of a Kim visit to Russia for a summit with Putin, should he find it difficult to visit Beijing first. Therefore, it is essential for Park to include Russia in her Northeast Asian regional strategy to address North Korean questions, whether nuclear threats, humanitarian issues, or economic reforms.

## TRUSTPOLITIK AS A WORKABLE GOLDILOCKS STRATEGY: WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Through the catchword *trustpolitik*, Park has repeatedly expressed her desire to engage in the “peace process” for improving inter-Korean affairs, an operable manifestation of *trustpolitik*, which underscores South Korea’s proactive diplomatic initiatives to create favorable external conditions as a crucial prerequisite. *Trustpolitik* can be both a means to achieve peace and security on the peninsula and an end goal to be fulfilled by the peace process. The Park administration also claims that whereas the policies of past governments have gone from one extreme to another, her strategy is a policy of alignment, i.e., neither a coercive policy nor an appeasement policy, but rather an effective and balanced combination of contending or competing policy options, such as inter-Korean and foreign relations, pressure and dialogue, and deterrence and cooperation, while separating humanitarian issues from those related to politics and security.

With the possibility of increasing uncertainty and unrest in North Korea in recent months, questions have been raised about South Korea’s preparedness for contingency scenarios that could include regime change. There have been lots of predictions about political instability and regime collapse over the last 20 years, generating plans like CONPLAN 5029, a military contingency plan drafted by South Korea and the United States in 1999 for responding to sudden change, which was finally developed into an operational plan in 2009.<sup>38</sup>

Given geostrategic circumstances surrounding the peninsula and the unique resilience of the North Korean leadership,<sup>39</sup> sudden collapse is unlikely in the foreseeable future, but there has been much speculation about how the Kim Jung-un regime would collapse.<sup>40</sup> In this regards, there has been more discussion about how to prepare for it instead of mere predictions about the collapse itself.<sup>41</sup> During her New Year press conference on January 6, 2014, Park mentioned “*tongil daebak*” (unification being the jackpot), which generated a hot debate over whether it would be a jackpot or crackpot. Due to the enormous economic burden (“*tongil biyong*” unification costs), a growing number of South Koreans have begun to consider this long-desired prospect as not only improbable, but also undesirable. Others claim that “*bundan biyong*” (division costs) are equally exorbitant, if not greater, because North Korea’s perilous and unpredictable actions have often generated a “Korea discount” in the global market and hurt South Korea’s overall image in the international community. Ordinary South Korean citizens also do not wish to tolerate any longer the uncertain environment arising from the North’s provocations. Meanwhile, Pyongyang charged that Park’s comment was “fueled by delusions about unification by absorption.”<sup>42</sup>

Considering that the ultimate objective of Park's peace process and trustpolitik is peaceful unification that would be "*daebak*" not only for the Koreans but for all of Northeast Asia, as she said in Davos in late January, there is reason to pursue new approaches to North Korea. First, the South's strategic communications and policy coordination with the United States and China are important to prepare for possible scenarios on the Korean Peninsula. For this, information sharing with these states and international consensus on handling unstable situations are desirable, deepening the '2+2' information-sharing formula between South Korean and U.S. diplomatic and military authorities and more actively consulting with the epistemic community at the regional level in analyzing North Korea's power restructuring trends and developing indicators for measuring its instability would be instrumental.

Second, independent of North Korea's nuclear crisis, its human rights problems and humanitarian crisis such as food shortages, political prisoners' camps, and refugee issues should be continually addressed on the international stage. The Park administration needs to develop strategies for how to take full advantage of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea, which released its report about "unspeakable atrocities" committed in the country and called for the international community's responsibility to protect the North Korean people from crimes against humanity,<sup>43</sup> the United Nation's Human Rights resolution targeting the North Korean regime, and other international human rights NGO activities. Third, the administration should seek ways to effectively build an international consensus for the eventual unification of the two Koreas. Employing various Track 1, Track 1.5, and Track 2 approaches is necessary, although, using direct government channels with China requires caution. During 2013, Park had a total of 27 summit meetings, including the ones with four great powers, and foreign ministers' meetings were more frequent. It is important to develop follow-up measures based on Park's linkage of trustpolitik and the peace process to NAPCI.

What I call Park's "middle of the road policy" needs to be reconsidered for its effectiveness. If her North Korean policy takes the safe road of not rocking the boat, she needs to face criticism, as Obama has, of being too wary and ineffectual in forging a breakthrough for rocky inter-Korean relations. A step-by-step approach towards developing the Goldilocks diplomatic strategy in the short and long-term should be clearly presented. The short-term should be a stepping-stone approach. In retrospect, there has been a plethora of ambitious and grandiose rhetoric in dealing with North Korean problems. To be fair, previous administrations in South Korea and the United States alike made considerable efforts to bring about the denuclearization of North Korea. However, with a lack of clear understanding about the desirable end state on the Korean Peninsula and the methodology to arrive there, they hastily attempted a variety of "comprehensive solutions." For instance, the George W. Bush administration proclaimed it was ready to take a "bold approach" to meet what it considered to be Pyongyang's needs, including negative security assurance and economic incentives in exchange for North Korea abandoning its nuclear weapons programs in a comprehensive fashion. Policy makers in Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington each had their own initiatives, which were varied in name but not-so-different in essence—a "package deal."

Roh Moo-hyun's "peace regime" and Bush's "complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization" (CVID) are well-known examples. Although the merits of such deals should not to be ignored, North Korea's notorious "salami tactics" proved to be particularly tricky to overcome. The Lee government's "Vision 3000" was not so different in this regard.

When the decades-long effort turned out to be a series of failures, it was clear to everyone that a major paradigm shift or a “game changer” in dealing with the North was absolutely necessary. Park’s trustpolitik strives to avoid this past pattern.

Longer term planning should be related to preparation for unification, building an international consensus for this. North Korean refugees and humanitarian issues should not be put aside. South Korean decision makers may have to reconsider their previous “low profile” approach to these issues. South Korea can take valuable lessons from German unification, where the East German government did not merely change, it collapsed completely from within. Purely in order to ease the suffering of partition, the two sides negotiated with one another. They did not cooperate with one another, though the West was a dialogue partner for the East. Similarly, as reconciliation with the North Korean dictatorship proceeds, a regime that gravely represses its people must not be a collaborative partner. A national coalition cannot be formed between a free market system and a dictatorship that, at least on the outside, calls itself socialist. A unification strategy must be formed from this perspective. In educating young South Koreans about unification, the Park administration must acknowledge that the regime of Kim Jong-un does not represent the will of the North Korean people. They are taking the people hostage, and are not to be viewed as a party for cooperation. In this way, the next generation will take an interest in North Korean human rights and democratization.

## CONCLUSION

When new South Korean presidents are elected, it has been common for North Korea to make threats and provocations as it tests the new administration, but eventually the North takes conciliatory measures that can easily turn into another round of hostile acts. The Park administration has been prepared with a sustainable and resilient policy, both in its direct dealings with the North and in its close consultations with the international community. Nearly all previous efforts to reach an agreement with North Korea have failed to achieve meaningful accomplishments because Seoul had adhered to a negotiating principle of reaching a collective, comprehensive, and grand bargain, that was countered by North Korea’s salami tactics and other strategies to stall progress. Learning from these experiences, Park has been trying to build trust between the two Koreas, but with Pyongyang’s continuous provocations, her approach has not been successful in achieving its objectives.<sup>44</sup>

It is therefore better to strive for small but meaningful results in the short term, while also building on these achievements to move forward towards the ultimate goal in the mid to long term. In order to cultivate an environment for unification, Seoul needs to concentrate on cooperating with the international community and building global consensus and support for unification, while simultaneously dealing with issues in North Korea, not only traditional military issues, but also human rights and humanitarian assistance.

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# ASIA'S SLIPPERY SLOPE: TRIANGULAR TENSIONS, IDENTITY GAPS, CONFLICTING REGIONALISM, AND DIPLOMATIC IMPASSE TOWARD NORTH KOREA

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