

The North Korean Issue, Park Geun-hye's Presidency, and the Possibility of Trust-building on the Korean Peninsula

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For at least the past twenty years, the debate about how best to deal with North Korea has focused on whether pressure and isolation are more likely to change North Korean behavior, or whether inducements and engagement are more likely to produce results. This essay will explore the nuclear, economic, and humanitarian challenges that North Korea poses to the new South Korean President Park Geun-hye, arguing that a "mainstream" consensus has emerged in South Korea with a preference for selective engagement coupled with consistent and powerful responses to provocations and a strong military deterrent, and a willingness to ignore provocative North Korean rhetoric. Called "trustpolitik" by Park, this approach faces numerous obstacles in its implementation, and will require considerable diplomatic and political skill. Whether Park can be successful where so many South Korean leaders have previously failed will depend centrally on the policies she chooses, and the responses that come from the new regime in North Korea.

Key Words: trustpolitik, South and North Korea, deterrence, engagement

Introduction

In the winter of 2012-13, North Korea's third nuclear test, yet another long-range missile test, and increasingly provocative rhetoric threatened stability in Northeast Asia. Once again, North Korea engaged in bluster designed to project strength and resolve in the face of international disapproval. In the first few months of 2013 alone, the North threatened a nuclear attack on the United States, unilaterally withdrew from the 1953 Armistice, declared a 'state of war' existed on the Korean Peninsula, and cut the military hotline between the North and South. For their

part, the U.S. and South Korea signed a protocol for dealing with provocations from the North, flew B-2 Stealth bombers across South Korea as a show of force to deter the North, and conducted military exercises together in March 2013.

This latest round of tensions follows North Korea's sinking of the South Korean naval vessel *Cheonan* in March 2010, which was described as "South Korea's 9-11 moment." Eight months later, North Korean artillery fire killed two South Korean marines and two civilians, and wounded eighteen others in November 2010. That event was characterized as "the most serious incident since the Korean War."¹ Both incidents followed a November 2009 skirmish in which South Korean naval vessels opened fire on a North Korean patrol ship that had crossed the disputed Northern Limit Line, "damaging it badly," with suspected heavy casualties on the North Korean side, and to which North Korea vowed revenge.² Combined with revelations in November 2010 of a North Korean uranium nuclear program, nuclear tests of a plutonium-based weapon in 2006 and 2009, and continuing fears of missile and nuclear proliferation, the Peninsula is in a new Cold War.³ Deterrence, isolation, and symbolic shows of force and determination are the current strategies in place, and the "North Korea problem" remains as intractable as ever.

The North Korean nuclear issue has been the most important security issue in the region for at least two decades, and despite new

1. Donald Kirk, "Holed *Cheonan* Stern Ups the Ante," *Asia Times*, April 17, 2010, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/LD17Dg01.html>; Tom A. Peter, "North and South Korea Clash across Tense Border," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 23, 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/1123/North-and-South-Korea-clash-across-tense-border>.

2. Choe Sang-hun, "North Korea Warns South after Naval Clash," *The New York Times*, November 11, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/12/world/asia/12korea.html>.

3. This uranium facility opens up the possibility of a second pathway to nuclear weapons development, a revelation that in and of itself is not immediately indicative of a weapons program. Many observers in the United States and South Korea believe, however, that this facility raises the probability of many hidden uranium facilities.

developments, such as the rise of grandson Kim Jong Un as the new North Korean leader, the underlying issues remain depressingly the same: how to reign in North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, deter North Korea from starting a second Korean War, and limit North Korea's sale of its technology to other countries. The debate remains the same, as well: is pressure and isolation more likely to change North Korean behavior? Or are inducements and engagement more likely to produce results?⁴

Yet North Korea is a foreign policy problem for South Korea beyond the issues of nuclear proliferation and international security, and these same basic questions manifest themselves in the debates about North Korea's economy and its deplorable record of human rights abuses. Why and how can the country survive with an economy that is so poor, so backwards, and so isolated compared with its rapidly developing neighbors? Why has North Korea not pursued economic reforms and opening? Should foreign countries — and South Korea in particular — promote marketization, economic reforms, and capitalism in North Korea, or should they limit or prohibit foreign economic interactions altogether? Regarding human rights, profound ethical questions face both scholars and practitioners of international relations: how can we improve human rights in North Korea and the lives of its people? Should external actors — governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other groups — work with a regime that is repugnant in so many ways, if it can improve the lives of innocent citizens? Or should South Korea isolate the North Korean regime and subject it to external pressure and embarrassment over its human rights record until it decides to change?

As the country most directly affected by North Korean actions, South Korean leaders have tried a number of strategies over the years, from engagement to isolation, with limited success. Warmer or colder South Korean relations with North Korea over the years have not solved the North Korea problem, and the debates within South

4. Victor Cha and David Kang, *Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

Korea over how best to approach North Korea reflect the basic question about whether isolation or interaction is the most effective policy. Park Geun-hye's dramatic election as the first female head of state in Northeast Asia is epochal, but it also is emblematic of a larger process of Korea's globalization, evolution, and increasing confidence about Korea's place in the world. As for North Korea policy, Park Geun-hye vividly called for building "trustpolitik" with the North, vowing during her campaign to "break with this black-or-white, appeasement-or-antagonism approach and advance a more balanced North Korea policy."⁵

This essay will explore the nuclear, economic, and humanitarian challenges that North Korea poses to South Korea, arguing that a "mainstream" consensus has emerged in South Korea with a preference for selective engagement coupled with consistent and powerful responses to provocations and a strong military deterrent, and a willingness to ignore provocative North Korean rhetoric. Building trust with North Korea, however, faces numerous obstacles in its implementation, and will require considerable diplomatic and political skill. Whether Park can be successful where so many South Korean leaders have previously failed will depend centrally on the policies she chooses, and the responses that come from the new regime in North Korea.

North Korea under Kim Jong Un

North Korea is in the midst of a major transition as the North adjusts to only its third leader in almost seventy years, and Kim Jong Un's installation as leader of North Korea creates new opportunities and dangers. Whether Kim can be more than a figurehead, and whether he can actually lead the country, is yet to be determined. North Korea

5. Park Geun-hye, "A New Kind of Korea: Building Trust between Seoul and Pyongyang," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 5 (September/October 2011), pp. 13-18; Kang Tae-ho, "Park Geun-hye's North Korea Policy," *Hankyoreh Sinmun*, January 9, 2013.

may yet again find a way to muddle through, with its basic ruling regime and leadership intact. If there is continuity in the North for the time being, the underlying task will remain the same: how to draw North Korea into the world and away from its dangerous, confrontational stance.

North Korea in 2013 is not the same as North Korea in 2000 — the political institutions, economy, and society have all experienced major and possibly enduring changes since then.⁶ North Korea contains a greater diversity of opinion and people than is commonly thought. Kim Jong Un is the leader of a totalitarian regime, but identifiable institutional differences, and undoubtedly personal differences, do exist. Largely as a result of weakened state control, the economy has experienced an increase of commercialization and marketization in recent years.⁷ The economy is stronger than many outsiders believe, in that it has proven remarkably enduring and adaptable, and many people now operate in the black, or private markets. At the same time, the regime itself is weaker than it was a decade ago: the unplanned marketization has shriveled the central government's control over the periphery, despite episodes of retrenchment. Informal and sporadic information from traders or family members in South Korea or in China continues to trickle into North Korea.

None of these changes necessarily mean that North Korea is headed toward collapse or that its state institutions are close to failing. Outsiders have been predicting North Korea's collapse for twenty years, if not longer, and yet North Korea has managed to survive.⁸

6. Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-Totalitarian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

7. John Park, "North Korea, Inc.: Gaining Insights into North Korean Regime Stability from Recent Commercial Activities," Working paper, United States Institute of Peace, 2009, <http://www.usip.org/publications/north-korea-inc-gaining-insights-north-korean-regime-stability-recent-commercial-activities>.

8. Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Coming Collapse of North Korea," *Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 1990; Byung-joon Ahn, "The Man Who Would Be Kim," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 6 (November/December 1994), pp. 94-108; Fareed Zakaria, "When North Korea Falls," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2010.

State officials benefit from marketization because it provides a measure of human security that lessens domestic resistance even while weakening officials' control. Corrupt officials benefit personally from marketization even as it undermines their position. Civil society is almost entirely absent in North Korea, and despite occasional reports of spontaneous "rice riots," there is little evidence that the North Korean people could engage in an Egyptian-style uprising of any sort.⁹ The society is too atomized; there are almost no "bottom-up" institutions around which political protests could cohere; and there are no social or civic leaders who could survive to become political leaders in protests against the government.

Authoritarian rulers do not long survive if they are truly out of touch with reality. They need to read palace politics, reward friends and punish enemies, and manage competing interests that are vying for power. Kim Jong Il lasted from 1994 until his death in December 2011 without any obvious internal challenge to his rule, a mark of his political acumen and mastery of factional politics. Although Kim Jong Un is inexperienced, he has held power for over a year and appears to have the acquiescence — at least for now — of the most powerful actors in Pyongyang.

In short, the North Korean regime and larger society in many ways are weaker, poorer, and more open to the outside world in 2013 than a decade earlier. Yet North Korea has also apparently managed a smooth transition of power to its third ruler and also has 8-12 nuclear weapons while continuing to move closer to successfully testing an intercontinental ballistic missile, and is thus more dangerous than ever before and shows few signs of collapsing. Indeed, the belligerence of the North Korean regime in 2013 was probably a signal to both domestic and international audiences that the new leader has no plans to change the basic contours of North Korea's foreign and domestic policies in any fundamental manner.

9. Scott Snyder, "Kim Jong-il's Successor Dilemmas," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (January 2010), pp. 35-46.

The limits to pressuring North Korea

Given the continuing threat that North Korea poses through its missile and nuclear programs, the nuclear issue remains the highest priority of both the South Korean and U.S. governments. In fact, most observers from across political spectrum agree on the goal: a denuclearized North Korea that opens to the world, pursues economic and social reforms, and increasingly respects human rights. Disagreement only occurs over the tactics — what policies will best prod North Korea on the path toward these outcomes. These debates over which strategy will best resolve the North Korea problem remain essentially the same as they were decades ago: is it best to engage North Korea and lure it into changing its actions and its relations with the outside world, or is it better to contain the problem and coerce North Korea into either changing or stopping its bad behavior?¹⁰

That is, some believe that coercion will eventually cause the North to capitulate, and that “just a little more” pressure on the regime will force it to submit. Unfortunately, past history reveals that this appears unlikely. North Korea has little history of giving something for nothing, and the leadership in Pyongyang has a consistent policy of meeting external pressure with pressure of its own.¹¹ There is little reason to think that applying even more pressure will finally result in North Korea meeting U.S. demands and a de-escalation of tension.

The sad fact is that the range of policy options available to both South Korea and other countries concerned about North Korea is quite thin. Few countries would consider military action to cause the regime to collapse, given that Seoul is vulnerable to their conventional weapons and that war or regime collapse could potentially unleash uncontrolled nuclear weapons and draw all the surrounding countries

10. e.g., Moon Young Park, “Lure North Korea,” *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 97 (Winter 1994-1995), pp. 97-105.

11. Leon Sigal, “Punishing North Korea Won’t Work,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 28, 2008, <http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/op-eds/punishing-north-korea-wont-work>; David C. Kang, “The Avoidable Crisis in North Korea,” *Orbis*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Summer 2003).

into conflict with each other.

South Korea and other concerned countries have no realistic military option in dealing with North Korea's security challenges other than a clear deterrent strategy to respond if North Korea acts first. Indeed, when White House spokesman Jay Carney was asked in April 2013 whether the United States might preemptively strike North Korea, he responded "that is not a serious question."¹² The situation is actually quite stable, because despite their bluster, the North Korean rhetoric is also cast almost entirely in deterrent terms. For example, although widely reported as a threat to preemptively attack the U.S. with nuclear weapons, the full quote from the KCNA in March 2013 reads: "We will take second and third countermeasures of greater intensity against the reckless hostilities of the United States and all the other enemies.... Now that the U.S. imperialists seek to attack the DPRK with nuclear weapons, it will counter them with diversified precision nuclear strike means of Korean style.... The army and people of the DPRK have everything including lighter and smaller nukes unlike what they had in the past."¹³ As Stephan Haggard noted recently, North Korean rhetoric in 2013 has been "cast in deterrent terms: the hyperbole is about actions the North would take *in response* to ROK or U.S. 'provocations,' defined as actual military action against the North. By exercising restraint with respect to actual military actions, the regime can count on the fact that the U.S. and South Korea are not going to take the first step either."¹⁴ This is, indeed, the case, and significantly both United States and ROK rhetoric in early

12. White House Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, April 1, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/01/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-412013>.

13. Choe Sang-hun, "North Korea Threatens to Attack U.S. With 'Lighter and Smaller Nukes,'" *The New York Times*, March 5, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/06/world/asia/north-korea-threatens-to-attack-us-with-lighter-and-smaller-nukes.html?_r=0.

14. Stephan Haggard, "What are the North Koreans Doing?" *Witness to Transformation blog*, Peterson IIE, April 1, 2013, <http://www.piiie.com/blogs/nk/?p=9889>.

2013 were also cast in deterrent terms. Thus, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said in April 2013: “the United States will do what is necessary to defend ourselves and defend our allies, Korea and Japan. We are fully prepared and capable of doing so, and I think the DPRK understands that.”¹⁵

War is unlikely because both sides believe the other’s rhetoric — both sides believe the other will respond if attacked. Seoul would be devastated, and the North Korean regime would cease to exist. Although the U.S. and ROK would eventually prevail in a war with the DPRK, the potential costs of a war are prohibitively high, and deter either side from realistically expecting to start and complete a major war without utter devastation to the Peninsula. Seoul and the surrounding environs hold almost 18 million people and lies less than 50 miles from the demilitarized zone that separates North and South Korea. The risk that North Korea would retaliate against Seoul is too great, given that North Korea has conventional artillery and short-range missiles within range of Seoul. Mike Chinoy quoted a Pentagon advisor close to Bush administration discussions about U.S. military options against North Korea as saying that, “The mainstream view was that if any kind of military strike starts against North Korea, the North Koreans would invade South Korea, and they will cause enormous destruction of Seoul. And we are not prepared to handle all this.”¹⁶

If outright military pressure is unlikely to be brought to bear on the Peninsula, economic sanctions have also been unsuccessful in changing the North Korean regime’s behavior in the past, and are unlikely to work in the future. There are two main obstacles that make economic sanctions unlikely to cause the North Korean regime to change its behavior. First, North Korea is already one of the most heavily sanctioned regimes in the world, and this has not changed

15. Jethro Mullen, “U.S. will not accept North Korea as a ‘nuclear state,’ Kerry says,” CNN.com, April 3, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/02/world/asia/koreas-tensions>.

16. Mike Chinoy, *Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009).

their behavior in the past.¹⁷ As Ruediger Frank concluded in his study of sanctions against North Korea, “in the long run, [sanctions] lose their impact and become a liability.”¹⁸ As Haggard and Noland conclude, “A coordinated strategy of cutting North Korea off from international assistance would increase the probability of regime change.... [But] that rests on a highly dubious utilitarian logic: that it is morally acceptable to sacrifice the innocent today in the uncertain probability that lives will be saved or improved at some future point.”¹⁹

The second difficulty with sanctions arises because neither Russia nor China is eager to push sanctions too hard on the North; and thus any U.N. sanctions are likely to be cosmetic in nature. In fact, Marcus Noland estimates that Chinese exports, and even exports of luxury goods, actually increased 140% since the imposition of the first round of sanctions in 2009.²⁰ The only country that could realistically impose severe enough sanctions on North Korea is China. Were China to impose draconian sanctions on North Korea, it could have a devastating effect. The Chinese appear to be fairly angered at North Korea’s latest moves, and the nuclear test in particular was a real insult to Chinese diplomatic efforts. The relationship might not be strong, but it remains. China is North Korea’s major trading partner and provides most of the North Korea’s energy needs; moreover, it has never seriously implemented any of the four rounds of sanctions the U.N. has passed targeting North Korea. Although it agreed to the most recent U.N. resolutions, China would actually have to substantially

17. Suk Hi Kim and Semoon Chang, eds., *Economic Sanctions Against a Nuclear North Korea: an analysis of United States and United Nations actions since 1950* (London: McFarland, 2007).

18. Ruediger Frank, “The Political Economy of Sanctions Against North Korea,” *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2006), pp. 5-36.

19. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 230.

20. Russia defined “luxury goods” loosely — as watches costing over \$2,000 and coats over \$9,000. Marcus Noland, “The (Non)-Impact of UN Sanctions on North Korea,” *Asia Policy* 7 (January 2009), pp. 61-88.

change its approach to Pyongyang to make the sanctions work, and it probably won't. Indeed, Scott Snyder noted in April 2013 that, "there was absolutely no sign of change in China's goal of maintaining peace and stability and denuclearization or the shared goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula through peaceful negotiations."²¹

China has more influence over North Korea than any other country, but less influence than outsiders think. Beijing-Pyongyang relations haven't been warm ever since China normalized relations with South Korea over twenty years ago, and both sides resent the other. But China has few options. Completely isolating North Korea and withdrawing economic and political support could lead to regime collapse, sending a flood of North Korean refugees across the border, and potentially drawing all the surrounding countries into conflict with each other — which could see the devastating use of nuclear weapons. Moreover, China fears that any conflict, or a collapse, could put South Korean or even U.S. troops on its eastern border. As a result, China — like the South Korea — is faced with the choices of rhetorical pressure, quiet diplomacy, and mild sanctions. Despite direct criticism of North Korea in spring 2013, there appeared to be no fundamental change in Chinese policy toward the North.²²

In sum, pressure in the form of military strikes or economic sanctions may be popular for domestic audiences in the ROK and United States, but in practice neither have been successful in changing regime behavior in North Korea. The ROK has severely limited policy options when dealing with its northern neighbor. It is within this context that Park's "trustpolitik" strategy needs to be assessed.

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21. Scott Snyder, "Secretary Kerry's First Visit to Northeast Asia: Rolling the North Korea Stone Back Up the Hill," *Asia Unbound* (Council on Foreign Relations blog), April 16, 2013, <http://blogs.cfr.org/asia/2013/04/16/secretary-kerrys-first-visit-to-northeast-asia-rolling-the-north-korea-stone-back-up-the-hill/>.
 22. Jane Perlez, "China Bluntly Tells North Korea to Enter Nuclear Talks," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/25/world/asia/china-tells-north-korea-to-return-to-nuclear-talks.html>.

North Korea policy under Park Geun-hye

Because there are few policy options available, Park Geun-hye will face a difficult series of decisions regarding North Korea during her tenure as president of the ROK. In an influential article written a year before her election as South Korean president, Park Geun-hye proposed a policy of “trustpolitik” toward the North. Arguing that “Precisely because trust is at a low point these days, South Korea has a chance to rebuild it,” Park proposed that rebuilding trust did not mean naïve hopefulness to the North, because “there must be assured consequences for actions that breach the peace.”²³ However, trustpolitik does mean exploring many possible options for finding ways to cooperate with the North when they arise. Park specifically mentioned the idea of rebuilding the Trans-Korean railway through the North that could benefit the entire region. Park’s concept of “trustpolitik” remains more a political phrase than a clearly-articulated policy vision, and the true test of Park’s vision will come in its implementation. Yet the concept of trustpolitik is significant in and of itself, signaling that Park is clearly open to interacting with the North on a broad range of issues, even if there is less progress on the nuclear weapons issue. This stance marks a clear move away from the principled isolationist stance of the previous South Korean government under Lee Myung-bak.

Park Geun-hye is the only senior South Korean political figure who has visited the North. Her election, and the mood of the South Korean people in general, gives an indication that South Korea is prepared to pursue a different course than her predecessor Lee Myung-bak, and to move back from the hard-line containment stance that he followed so assiduously. While Park is careful to distance herself from the “Sunshine Policy” of former South Korean Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, it is also clear that her policy toward the North will involve the possibility of interaction with the North across a range of issues. Indeed, all three major candidates for the presidency in 2012 campaigned on platforms that were designed to

23. Park, “A New Kind of Korea,” p. 17.

move away from a containment position. Robert Kelly observed that among South Koreans:

By far the most common sentiment is to manage and help the North, not confront it, to draw it into the world in hopes of moderating it. The logic that unconditional aid to North might be seen as a bail-out of a bankrupt system is generally rejected. The outcomes of these trends are Lee's abysmal approval rating, and the consensus among the presidential candidates for re-engagement.²⁴

The issue of trust is more than simply rhetoric. North Korea does not trust the United States or South Korea any more than those countries trust the North. Decades of animosity and mistrust on both sides makes negotiation and communication difficult, and decades of failed promises on both sides have led to the stalemate in which we find ourselves in 2013. For example, the U.S. is hostile to Pyongyang, and it is not accurate to pretend that the U.S. only wants to be friends and that North Koreans are merely paranoid. This is not to argue about which side holds the moral high ground, nor to argue that the North Koreans are innocent; clearly America has reason to mistrust the North. But the North Korean leadership also mistrusts the U.S. — they know very well that the ultimate U.S. goal is the transformation or even the obliteration of their way of life — and North Korea has reason to be wary. Despite the reality that both South Korea and the U.S. have reason to fear North Korean provocations, sound policy-making will only occur when leaders realize that North Koreans, despite having an odious regime, have legitimate national concerns as well. In this context, Park's attempt to find a way to move beyond mutual vilification represents a step in the right direction, despite the widespread recognition that building any type of real trust between the two sides will be difficult. Trust is not given, it is earned. Trust is built slowly, over time, as two sides slowly come to believe the other side may live up to its word. Given the past history of interactions

24. Robert Kelly, "Is Korean Democracy Maturing?" *Newsweek Japan*, December 26, 2012, <http://www.newsweekjapan.jp/magazine/89906.php>.

with North Korea, building actual trust is probably far away. Yet given that the alternatives appear to offer little hope of success, it is probably prudent that Park is willing to begin this process once again.

Dealing with North Korea, then, will most likely require more than the coercive components of sanctions and potential military strikes. This will include engagement, inducements, and hard negotiating from the ROK. The willingness of the ROK and other countries to engage in consistent negotiations with North Korea has wavered, and talks have been sporadic at best. However, Park has an opportunity to affect the tone and substance of South-North relations, and such moves will require three key aspects to her policy: consistent deterrence, careful but principled negotiations, and a willingness to ignore North Korean rhetoric. Of these, the last will be most difficult.

Maintaining a deterrent to North Korean provocations has already begun. Indeed, the North is deterred from starting a second Korean War precisely because of the clear military alliance between the U.S. and ROK. Beyond deterring an all-out war, early in Park Geun-hye's administration, Seoul and Washington moved closer in deterring small-scale provocations along the border, through such measures as the "counter-provocation plan" agreed upon between Seoul and Washington in March 2013.²⁵ This closer coordination between the U.S. and South Korea is designed to prepare for and respond more competently to small-scale skirmishes such as the Yeonpyeong shelling that occurred in 2010. This will be harder than it appears, because South Korean defense budgets over the past decade have remained essentially flat as a percentage of GDP, and increased only marginally in real terms. In April 2013, for example, the new government announced its defense spending would increase 0.7 percent, from \$30.5 billion to \$30.7 billion, to better defend its western mar-

25. David Sanger and Thom Shanker, "U.S. Designs a Korea Response Proportional to the Provocation," *The New York Times*, April 7, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/08/world/asia/us-and-south-korea-devise-plan-to-counter-north.html?pagewanted=all>.

itime border against North Korean provocations.²⁶

Principled negotiations will be the second important aspect to Park's North Korea policy. A willingness to provide some incentives to the North, as well as negotiate over difficult issues, will be key in lowering the tensions that currently exist between the North and the outside world. This does not mean appeasement — what it means is to take North Korea's concerns seriously and be willing to show flexibility over some issues. Indeed, President Park has already begun to make small gestures indicating a willingness to interact with North Korea. For example, on March 22, 2013, the ROK government approved the shipment of \$600,000 worth of medical supplies to North Korea. It was the first shipment authorized under the new Park government, and may have signaled the willingness to move away from simple name-calling and muscle-flexing.²⁷

The Ministry of Unification also unveiled a proposal that provides a window on the government's emerging policy toward the North. Titled "Settling Peace and Establishing a Foundation for a Unified Korea," the document describes in some detail, a series of measures that the South is considering pursuing toward the North. The plan involves three-steps that entail ascending levels of reciprocity from the North. Initially humanitarian aid would be provided without any expectation of reciprocity. If successful, the next step would involve expanding economic relations with the North without linking it to the nuclear issue, and would entail limited reciprocity from the North. At the final stage, large-scale South Korean government assistance would be available to the North, but only if the North Korean regime took significant steps toward denuclearization. However, the Park government is also moving slowly toward interacting with North Korea. In May 2013, the Park government rejected "talks for

26. "S. Korea to increase defense spending by \$200 million this year," *Arirang News*, April 16, 2013, http://www.arirang.co.kr/News/News_View.asp?nseq=146064.

27. Chung Min-uck, "Will Seoul engage North Korea soon?" *CanKor*, March 27, 2013, <http://vtncankor.wordpress.com/2013/03/27/will-seoul-engage-north-korea-soon-by-chung-min-uck/>.

the sake of talking,"²⁸ arguing that North Korea needs to begin living up to the agreements it has already signed with the South, such as the freeze of its nuclear programs.

The hardest part of dealing with the North is seeing the reality behind their comical and often hysterical Communist rhetoric. Pyongyang's claims to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire" and to attack the U.S. mainland with nuclear weapons should be seen as the empty threats that they are. To respond to directly to North Korea's rhetoric is to allow the North to determine the pace and intensity of the relationship. In fact, North Korea's response to the limited proposals produced by the Park government in spring 2013, were quickly denounced as a "crafty trick" designed to cover up the current stalemate on the Peninsula.²⁹ Yet just as significantly, there was no denunciation of President Park herself, nor was there an outright rejection of talks with the South — usually an indication that the North is saving face for the moment, and providing a gap between the belligerent talk of early spring 2013 and perhaps serious discussions to follow. For President Park, the power of her position and the ability to frame debate and discussion about North Korea will be a critical component of her success: she will need to handle the inevitable problems that will arise from dealing with the North while also convincing a South Korean populace that both the goals and the tactics of her policy are worthwhile pursuing.

In fact, there are indications that the cycle is shifting away from confrontation and toward interaction among the countries involved in the Peninsula. China's leadership has publicly criticized North Korea's recent actions, and specifically called on North Korea to return to the bargaining table. The North has signaled such a willingness as well, with special envoy Choe Ryong-hae being quoted as telling the

28. Choe Sang-hun, "South Korea Urges North to Be Serious Before Talks," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/28/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear-program.html?_r=0.

29. "N Korea calls dialogue offer by S Korea a 'crafty trick'," *BBC News*, April 14, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-22146141>.

Chinese leadership in May 2013 that North Korea was willing to “take positive actions to solve problems through dialogue.”³⁰ Japanese Prime Minister Abe sent a secret envoy to Pyongyang in hopes of restarting dialogue about how to resolve the question of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea a generation ago, and although no progress was forthcoming, such a step was indicative that the Japanese are also willing to consider moving beyond pure isolation of the North Korean regime.³¹ For South Korea, Park has indicated a willingness to discuss a range of issues, although at this point there are no direct talks between the North and the South. Although it is doubtful that any progress would occur quickly, the shifting tone on all sides does indicate that parties are seeking a way to move back from the tensions that marked early 2013.

Conclusion: the challenges of the future

The challenges that South Korea faces in dealing with North Korea are many and complex, and it appears unlikely that any breakthrough is imminent. There appears to be little hope of a negotiated solution involving its nuclear and missile programs. The United States, South Korean, and Japanese governments have chosen containment and isolation, pressuring the North Korean regime to make concessions before they make any moves. This policy has been fairly successful in the domestic politics of both the United States and South Korea, and there is little indication that either government plans to change its strategy.

Yet the larger North Korea problem involves more than the security issue, and a strategy of isolation and minimal interaction with North

30. “N. Korean envoy in China expresses willingness to engage in talks,” *Arirang News*, May 24, 2013, http://www.arirang.co.kr/News/News_View.asp?nseq=147445.

31. Martin Fackler, “Japanese Aide Makes Rare Trip to North Korea,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/15/world/asia/japanese-aide-visits-north-korea.html?_r=0.

Korea means that the weakest and most vulnerable will continue to lead a hazardous existence, with near-famine conditions possible each year. The only way to solve the hunger issue is to bring North Korea into the world market and help it earn enough abroad through trade so that it can import adequate quantities of food. The North Korean government also continues to engage in horrific and systematic human rights abuses; international isolation has done little to curb those abuses and may in fact encourage them. Thus, dealing with the immediate economic and social issues in North Korea and interacting with the government and people of North Korea may work at cross-purposes to policies designed to pressure North Korea into making concessions on its nuclear and missile programs.

In the coming years, President Park Geun-hye will face enormous challenges in dealing with the North, and in particular her goal of building trust between the two sides. However, an approach that combines a clear deterrent, willingness to negotiate over certain issues, and an emphasis on as much economic and social matters as on military matters, is the path most likely to reduce tensions and stabilize the situation. This will take considerable political skill, diplomatic courage, and an ability to explain her actions to both her public and South Korea's neighbors and allies.

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