



Prospects & Perspectives

Much Ado about Nothing? *Trustpolitik* and the Future of the Korean Peninsula

Dr. Yeh-chung Lu

Peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula are central to the future of East Asia, because a war between South and North Korea would jeopardize the security as well as prosperity of every country in this region. During the presidential campaign, Madame Park Geun-hye declared that she would pursue a relatively modest but pragmatic path to cope with North Korea. With the concept of *trustpolitik*, Park Geun-hye aims to reach out to North Korea with economic aid and cultural contacts and expects goodwill in return. This approach, according to Park, is essential to gradually shape North Korea's truculent behavior over the past decades and to ensure peace and prosperity in East Asia.

However, North Korea decided to respond with a nuclear test on February 12, 2013, followed by its unilateral renunciation of the 1953 Armistice Agreement that ended the Korean War. As a result, the extent to which Park's *trustpolitik* might work is in question.

This essay aims to provide a preliminary analysis of Park's North Korea policy, dubbed

as *trustpolitik*. The authors argue that the concept of *trustpolitik* is a prerequisite to peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula and requires concrete and feasible policy choices to create a virtuous circle from which both South and North Korea can benefit. Given that provocations from the North may become a constant in the near future, collaboration from regional players, especially the United States and China, is central to the success of *trustpolitik*.

✚ ESSENCE OF TRUSTPOLITIK

In September, 2011, Madame Park published an article to elaborate her policy toward North Korea in *Foreign Affairs*, in which "building trust" is the key issue in the inter-Korean relations. The goal of this approach is twofold: on the one hand, it aims to re-establish economic and cultural ties in exchange for more responsible behavior from North Korea; on the other hand, it can sustain, if not help, President Park's popularity domestically by punishing the North if the latter decides not to cooperate. "To ensure





stability,” Madame Park contended, this approach “should be applied consistently from issue to issue based on verifiable actions.” In other words, any conduct of North Korea will be closely watched by South Korea and the international community to make sure it is well-intended and then reward is to follow.

It is wise for President Park to adopt this tit-for-tat strategy vis-à-vis North Korea given the latter’s track record on nuclearization since the 1990s. To make *trustpolitik* successful, however, requires at least three conditions. First, domestic support is a necessity for President Park to make an adjustment from her predecessor Lee Myung-bak’s relatively hawkish policy. Second, South Korea needs a credible deterrence to demonstrate that North Korea will pay a heavy price for its bellicose behavior. Last, but not least, South Korea needs to garner the support of the international community to persuade North Korea to dismantle its nuclear program. North Korea, with reassurance from the international community that its regime can survive, should be willing to moderate its behavior.

SITUATIONS FAVORABLE AND UNFAVORABLE TO *TRUSTPOLITIK*

North Korea’s recent belligerent behavior proves how difficult it is to build trust in inter-Korean relations. The Park administration maintains that in addition to its outreach to the North, the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance is of significance in terms of shaping the North’s behavior. President Park, in her inaugural speech, responded to the North’s

nuclear test by stating: “there should be no mistake that the biggest victim will be none other than North Korea itself.” The U.S. and South Korea are currently conducting military drills as a reaction and a summit meeting is scheduled for President Park’s visit to the United States in May.

In the meantime, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has adopted a resolution to tighten its sanctions against North Korea. It is worth noting that for the first time China has actually worked with the U.S. to formulate the content of this resolution. This latest development in relation to the UNSC is indicative that China has begun to seriously think about whether a bellicose North Korea is still a “strategic asset” to China. To many Chinese analysts, North Korea seems to be a “liability” especially under Kim Jong-un, while the latter is trying to forge a foreign policy independent of China’s influence. President Park also advocates a South Korea-U.S.-China strategic dialogue to lock in China’s willingness to cooperate.

Domestic support for President Park is intriguing. On the one hand, the general public in South Korea seem to support a relatively mild response to North Korea, but on the other hand the majority maintain that South Korea should nuclearize itself as a deterrent. According to a survey conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies following the North’s third nuclear test in February, the majority (67%) supported President Park’s *trustpolitik* approach with potential



engagement with a better-behaved North Korea. While most respondents (38%) preferred negotiation and cooperation as to how to move the inter-Korean relations forward, however, a significant number of respondents (22%) considered a firm military response to be an appropriate means, along with a plurality (30%) that maintained that economic sanctions are necessary to shape North Korea's behavior. In the same survey, there is growing support for South Korea to be equipped with nuclear weapons, from 56% in 2010 to 66% in 2013.

It is safe to argue that President Park's *trustpolitik* has strengthened its roots in South Korea and has the support of the U.S. However, in the Asan survey the general public seemed to prioritize other domestic issues such creating jobs, economic democratization, and the redistribution of wealth, placing these before inter-Korean relations. While Kim Jong-un's intention remains unclear, whether China will stick to its rethinking of North Korea and whether and to what extent the U.S. and China can continue to work together on the denuclearization of the North have also been called into question.

✚ COLLABORATION AS A NECESSITY

North Korea is now once again reacting aggressively toward South Korea, the U.S. and the UNSC. Provocations in rhetoric and probably in action are expected, and the considerable costs in domestic politics for South or North Korea to back down may further complicate the situation. The mechanism of the Six-Party Talks has proved to be ineffective, and it is time to establish a regional security architecture to arrest the downward spiral originating from the security dilemma. All parties in the Asia-Pacific should take part in this emerging security architecture, in which the reconciliation between Taiwan and mainland China may help shed light on the future reconciliation between the two Koreas.

(Dr. Yeh-chung Lu is Assistant Professor at the Department of Diplomacy, College of International Affairs, National Cheng-chi University)

Editor's Note: The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the Prospect Foundation.

The Prospect Foundation is an independent research institution dedicated to the study of cross-strait relations and international issues. The Foundation maintains active exchanges and communications with many think tanks of the world.

Prospect Foundation
No. 1, Lane 60, Sec. 3, Tingzhou Rd., Zhongzheng District
Taipei City, 10087, Republic of China (Taiwan)
Tel: 886-2-2365-4366 Fax: 886-2-23679193
<http://www.pf.org.tw>

