



# PARK'S "TRUSTPOLITIK" CHALLENGE

*Sangsoo Lee with Bernt Berger*

*Half-way into her presidential term how has President Park Geun-hye's "trustpolitik" fared in regard to assuaging tensions and dispelling mistrust vis-à-vis North Korea? Sangsoo Lee and Bernt Berger argue that while the South Korean government should seek to implement a more pro-active trust-building approach, there are also substantial issues and challenges to take into account and overcome if such is to bear fruit.*

Upon becoming president in February 2013, Park Geun-hye pledged to adopt a "trustpolitik" towards North Korea at the same time as maintaining a strong deterrence against Pyongyang's provocations. In so doing, she has sought to steer a middle-course between the pro-engagement and hardline stances of her predecessors. More than half-way into her term, however, it is obvious that Park's policy has focused more on applying pressure on North Korea to change its behavior than it has on initiating a mutual trust-building process. Measured against the yardstick of improved inter-Korean relations, the reality is that trust and interactions between the two Koreas remain low. With little over two years left of the Park presidency, the biggest challenge for her government is to more actively promote and implement a trustpolitik that seeks to achieve greater confidence and cooperation between Seoul and Pyongyang. Yet it is important to recognize that a substantial rapprochement between the two countries is impossible without also addressing the broader agenda of peace-building and the nuclear issue.

## Steering a Middle Course

All incoming South Korean presidents face the challenge of defining a policy towards North Korea with the aim of persuading it to become a more reliable, non-threatening partner. Previous South Korean governments adopted two different approaches in this regard. From 1998 to 2007, the so-called Sunshine Policy pursued by Kim Dae-jung and his successor Roh Moo-hyun relied on proactive engagement with North Korea through large-scale humanitarian assistance, economic aid, and high-level inter-Korean meetings. However, this policy was criticized for having done too much to appease Pyongyang without reciprocity. The subsequent Lee Myung-bak government there-

fore pursued much more limited engagement while adopting a hardline policy that imposed sanctions and stipulated preconditions regarding North Korea's denuclearization. Yet both approaches can ultimately be adjudged to have failed: neither succeeded in substantially changing North Korea's behavior or calculus, nor did they succeed in sustainably improving relations between the two Koreas.

The fact that neither engagement without preconditions nor pressure had proven effective was the dilemma Park Geun-hye faced when she became president in February 2013. During her campaign, Park sought to distance her policy from Lee Myung-bak's hardline stance toward North Korea. Claiming to have learned from the failure of her predecessors, Park has instead sought to find a middle-ground. The first leg of her approach asserts the need to deter and maintain a strong response to perceived "provocations" by North Korea such as missile tests and military actions. Put simply, "bad behavior" will not be tolerated. The second leg has focused on engagement diplomacy based on the principle of trustpolitik with the aim of transforming the atmosphere of suspicion and conflict into one of confidence and cooperation. In so doing, Park maintained that she would pursue an "open" policy to negotiations with the North.

As such, she pledged to implement a number of inter-Korean initiatives as follows: the renewal of humanitarian aid to the North; re-establishing social and cultural exchanges including family reunions; the creation of "South-North Exchange and Cooperation Offices" in Seoul and Pyongyang; and the establishment of a peace park in the DMZ. Park also expressed her willingness to meet the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un; the last time Korean leaders met was in October 2007 at the Second Inter-Korean Summit.



## No Change in Inter-Korean Relations

Yet half-way into Park's term in office, it is evident that inter-Korean relations have not substantially improved or trust been created. This does not mean there have not been any successes. Family reunions were held in February 2014, with another round scheduled for the end of October 2015; this following the August 25, 2015 agreement between the two sides that sought to ease tensions. In mid-2013, the Kaesong Industrial Complex was reopened, while in October 2014 a senior North Korean delegation attended the Asian Games in Incheon. But the fact remains that most of Park's ambitious pledges, including the creation of a peace park, establishment of inter-Korean cooperation offices, and holding of a summit meeting, have so far not materialized.

Instead, relations have also been marred by military tensions. Among notable incidents, North Korea fired short- and mid-range missiles in response to U.S.-ROK joint military exercises in March 2014, patrol boats from both Koreas exchanged fire near Yeonpyeong Island seven months later, and a landmine explosion wounded two South Korean soldiers in the DMZ in August 2015. Seoul has squarely placed the blame on Pyongyang for these events. It has responded robustly by demanding Pyongyang apologize, and even resumed anti-North Korean propaganda broadcasts for the first time since 2004.

The failure to build trust and confidence is therefore firmly laid at Pyongyang's door: that is, the decision lies with Pyongyang to refrain from provocative actions before positive interactions can be pursued and substantive trust created. By putting the onus on North Korea while at the same time maintaining strong deterrence and refusing to lift sanctions, Park's policy has so far more leaned to pressure than engagement. Therefore, in spite of having made declarations, a real trustpolitik has not yet been fully implemented. Notwithstanding, as is elaborated on below, a trustpolitik independent of multinational initiatives involving the U.S. and China will not bear any fruit. It remains to be seen if and how Seoul's Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) can complement and fulfill such a need.

## Challenges to Trustpolitik

While Seoul needs to be more proactive than declaratory in building up its trustpolitik, any new agenda needs to take into account at least four kinds of challenges.

First, the Park government's room for maneuver is restricted by hardliners, particularly among her (former military) advisors. A softer stance vis-à-vis the North would not resonate positively in the opinion polls and her Seanuri Party, especially if Pyongyang is not seen to satisfactorily reciprocate. And while people-to-people exchanges including family reunions are viewed positively, lengthy engagement processes, concessions, and bargaining constitute harder "sells." Moreover, trustpolitik is a long-term commitment and may also involve many setbacks related to international factors than the bilateral agenda per se.

Second, trust-building is a mutual effort among the parties involved. Unilateral statements (for example, President Park's Dresden speech in March 2014 was interpreted by Pyongyang as espousing reunification by absorption) and initiatives without prior bilateral agreements and dialogue are more likely to create additional resentment rather than renewed progress. Furthermore, trustpolitik under the current government has been lopsided insofar that the expectation is for North Korea to demonstrate sincerity and willingness to change its ways. And yet, in terms of mutual confidence-building, a clear commitment on the side of Seoul is only envisaged for later stages of the process. Such a proceeding has been negatively received by Pyongyang.

The underlying issue is that Park's "middle way" approach has been hampered by a lack of trust in confidence building from the outset. Due to past failures, the South Korean government does not believe in the ability of confidence-building measures (CBMs) with the North to actually achieve a trusting base for further negotiations. North Korea has in the past hampered any progress, creating lasting reasons for mistrust among all countries involved in negotiations. Nuclear and missile tests have undermined trust-building efforts and perpetuated the gridlock on the Peninsula; from Pyongyang's perspective, meanwhile, the same is true of joint military exercises between the U.S. and South Korea.

Third, mistrust on the side of North Korea in any kind of process that does not explicitly guarantee the integrity of two systems on the peninsula is a major hold-up. The underlying issue is indeed whether the North is able to permanently engage in any dialogues and implement steps towards greater opening and exchange. So far the main spoilers on the side of the North have been either internal problems or matters of (regime) survival. This raises the question as to whether the North is able to engage in result-oriented processes at all. A key concern in Pyongyang is that the goal



of any process is designed to use structural imbalances between North and South in order to eventually absorb the North in any reunification. A more substantial concern is that any concessions could lead to strategic disadvantages particularly vis-à-vis South Korea's key ally, the U.S. The absence of any progress on a multilateral level including security guarantees and a process leading towards a peace treaty are a major obstacle for the North Korean side.

Fourth, and consequent to the point above, a South Korean approach to trustpolitik cannot be conceptualized without taking into consideration the wider international context. Indeed, the North Korean nuclear issue is not a bilateral one between the two Koreas but involves other powers. The same is true of U.S.-led military exercises with South Korea and the status of the DMZ. It is therefore difficult to separate bilateral issues from the international agenda, and in the absence of progress regarding the latter, this narrows the opportunity for substantive trust-building between the two Koreas.

In sum, for the South Korean government any unilateral attempt at bilateral trust-building would mean squaring the circle. The overall process of engagement and rapprochement is inseparable from simultaneous progress at a multilateral level, which, thus, necessitates an interactive approach towards North Korea. Moving beyond the declaratory level would mean to address key issues and meeting the challenges with practical, direct, and formal engagement. At the same time, interactive engagement needs flexibility and the political will to contribute with constructive input and the taking of risks.

## A Way Forward?

A comprehensive and sustainable trustpolitik needs to go beyond its initial framework of inter-Korean engagement and CBMs by setting the stage for multilateral negotiations. Initial steps should serve this purpose and also be part of a broader roadmap resulting from a practical engagement with the North. Necessary steps in this regard include as follows:

- 1) A formal declaration that unambiguously reaffirms that South Korea adheres to a two systems principle and does not seek reunification by absorption.
- 2) The establishment of a joint committee for the preparation of Korean unification in order to facilitate inter-Korean exchange and the setting up of a range of processes. Such a committee can be assisted by establishing South-

North Exchange and Cooperation Offices in Seoul and Pyongyang. Given that international agreements provide sufficient ground, the peace park initiative in the DMZ and other inter-Korean projects, which Park pledged before she took office, can be implemented.

- 3) The joint committee necessarily also promotes and sets the stage for a resumption of Six Party Talks and a trilateral forum (DPRK, ROK, U.S.) for a peace process on the Peninsula.

## Conclusion

While the challenges and spoilers are many, President Park should seek to implement a more active trustpolitik in the second half of her presidency. Having shown a "robust" response to North Korea in the first two years of her term, now is time to lean more to engagement. Maintaining the current policy that waits for North Korea to first show sincerity and willingness to change will only anchor the status quo of distrust and limited positive interactions – a situation Park pledged to try and move beyond upon taking office. Importantly, for any trustpolitik at a bilateral level between the two Koreas to succeed, it must be simultaneously buttressed by multilateral initiatives involving especially the U.S. and China.

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