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A New Kind of Korea

Building Trust Between Seoul and Pyongyang

Park Geun-hye

On August 15, 1974, South Korea's Independence Day, I lost my mother, then the country's first lady, to an assassin acting under orders from North Korea. That day was a tragedy not only for me but also for all Koreans. Despite the unbearable pain of that event, I have wished and worked for enduring peace on the Korean Peninsula ever since. But 37 years later, the conflict on the peninsula persists. The long-simmering tensions between North and South Korea resulted in an acute crisis in November 2010. For the first time since the Korean War, North Korea shelled South Korean territory, killing soldiers and civilians on the island of Yeonpyeong.

Only two weeks earlier, South Korea had become the first country outside the G-8 to chair and host a G-20 summit, welcoming world leaders to its capital, Seoul. These events starkly illustrated the dual reality of the Korean Peninsula and of East Asia more broadly. On the one hand, the Korean Peninsula remains volatile. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction by North Korea, the modernization of conventional forces

across the region, and nascent great-power rivalries highlight the endemic security dilemmas that plague this part of Asia. On the other hand, South Korea's extraordinary development, sometimes called the Miracle on the Han River, has, alongside China's rise, become a major driver of the global economy over the past decade.

These two contrasting trends exist side by side in Asia, the information revolution, globalization, and democratization clashing with the competitive instincts of the region's major powers. To ensure that the first set of forces triumphs, policymakers in Asia and in the international community must not only take advantage of existing initiatives but also adopt a bolder and more creative approach to achieving security. Without such an effort, military brinkmanship may only increase—with repercussions well beyond Asia. For this reason, forging trust and sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula represents one of the most urgent and crucial tasks on Asia's list of outstanding security challenges.

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INTRODUCING TRUST

A lack of trust has long undermined attempts at genuine reconciliation between North and South Korea. What little confidence did exist between the two countries virtually disappeared last year, after North Korea destroyed the South Korean naval ship *Cheonan* in March and brazenly attacked Yeonpyeong Island in November. North Korea also revealed that it had constructed a sophisticated uranium-enrichment facility, directly contravening commitments it had undertaken, most recently in the September 19, 2005, joint statement of the six-party talks, to forbid uranium enrichment and abandon its nuclear weapons program.

As one Korean proverb goes, one-handed applause is impossible. By the same token, peace between the two Koreas will not be possible without a combined effort. For more than half a century, North Korea has blatantly disregarded international norms. But even if Seoul must respond forcefully to Pyongyang's provocations, it must also remain open to new opportunities for improving relations between the two sides. Precisely because trust is at a low point these days, South Korea has a chance to rebuild it. In order to transform the Korean Peninsula from a zone of conflict into a zone of trust, South Korea should adopt a policy of "trustpolitik," establishing mutually binding expectations based on global norms.

"Trustpolitik" does not mean unconditional or one-sided trust without verification. Nor does it mean forgetting North Korea's numerous transgressions or rewarding the country with new incentives. Instead, it should be comprised of two coexisting strands: first, North Korea

must keep its agreements made with South Korea and the international community to establish a minimum level of trust, and second, there must be assured consequences for actions that breach the peace. To ensure stability, trustpolitik should be applied consistently from issue to issue based on verifiable actions, and steps should not be taken for mere political expediency.

Building trust between competing nations has been accomplished before. The United States and China overcame deep mutual suspicions to establish relations in the 1970s. Egypt and Israel signed a peace accord in 1979 after a gradual process of trust-building between the two sides, and the agreement remains a linchpin of stability for the entire Middle East, even after the change in regime in Egypt earlier this year. In the 1950s, European nations overcame a half century of warfare to create what would later become the European Union.

Although Asia's cultural, historical, and geopolitical environment is unique, the continent can learn from these precedents, particularly Europe's experience. To begin with, Asian states must slow down their accelerating arms buildup, reduce military tensions, and establish a cooperative security regime that would complement existing bilateral agreements and help resolve persistent tensions in the region. In addition, they should strengthen existing multilateral regimes—such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, a formal dialogue among 27 nations on East Asian security issues; the trilateral summits through which China, Japan, and South Korea coordinate their shared policy concerns; and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. Together, these efforts would help form a more resilient Asian

security network and build trust and security on the Korean Peninsula. Such endeavors will undoubtedly take time. But if North and South Korea and other Asian countries can institutionalize confidence-building measures, they will bolster the odds that economic and political cooperation can overcome military and security competition.

BRINGING PYONGYANG INTO THE FOLD

To establish trustpolitik on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea should adapt its past strategies toward North Korea. Previous governments in Seoul have alternatively attempted to engage and deter Pyongyang. The ones that have emphasized accommodation and inter-Korean solidarity have placed inordinate hope in the idea that if the South provided sustained assistance to the North, the North would abandon its bellicose strategy toward the South. But after years of such attempts, no fundamental change has come. Meanwhile, the governments in Seoul that have placed a greater emphasis on pressuring North Korea have not been able to influence its behavior in a meaningful way, either.

A new policy is needed: an alignment policy, which should be buttressed by public consensus and remain constant in the face of political transitions and unexpected domestic or international events. Such a policy would not mean adopting a middle-of-the-road approach; it would involve aligning South Korea's security with its cooperation with the North and inter-Korean dialogue with parallel international efforts. An alignment policy would entail assuming a tough line against North Korea sometimes and a flexible policy open to negotiations other times.



HAN JAE-HO/REUTERS

Park Geun-hye in Seoul, August 17, 2007

For example, if North Korea launches another military strike against the South, Seoul must respond immediately to ensure that Pyongyang understands the costs of provocation. Conversely, if North Korea takes steps toward genuine reconciliation, such as reaffirming its commitment to existing agreements, then the South should match its efforts. An alignment policy will, over time, reinforce trustpolitik.

To implement such an alignment policy, South Korea must first demonstrate, through a robust and credible deterrent posture, that it will no longer tolerate North Korea's increasingly violent provocations. It must show Pyongyang that the North will pay a heavy price for its military and nuclear threats. This approach is not new, but in order to change the current

situation, it must be enforced more vigorously than in the past.

In particular, Seoul has to mobilize the international community to help it dismantle Pyongyang's nuclear program. Under no circumstances can South Korea accept the existence of a nuclear-armed North Korea. North Korea's nuclearization also poses a major threat to the international community because Pyongyang could develop long-range missiles with nuclear warheads or transfer nuclear technologies and materials abroad. Through a combination of credible deterrence, strenuous persuasion, and more effective negotiation strategies, Seoul and the international community must make Pyongyang realize that it can survive and even prosper without nuclear weapons.

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If North Korea undertakes additional nuclear tests, South Korea must consider all possible responses in consultation with its principal ally, the United States, and other key global partners.

Even as Seoul and its allies strengthen their posture against North Korea's militarism and nuclear brinkmanship, they must also be prepared to offer Pyongyang a new beginning. Trust can be built on incremental gains, such as joint projects for enhanced economic cooperation, humanitarian assistance from the South to the North, and new trade and investment opportunities. When I met the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang in 2002, we discussed a range of issues, including a Eurasian railway project that would reconnect the Trans-Korean Railway, which has been severed since the Korean War, and link it to the Trans-Siberian and Trans-China lines. Reconnecting the Korean railway would be a testament to mutual development and inter-Korean peace. And if that line were then tied to other regional lines, the effort could help develop China's three northeastern provinces and Russia's Far East—and, in turn, perhaps transform the Korean Peninsula into a conduit for regional trade. Although tensions have delayed further discussions about the railway project in recent years, these could be restarted as a means of building trust on vital security matters.

The rest of the world can help with these efforts. To begin with, strengthening the indispensable alliance between South Korea and the United States should send unequivocal signals to North Korea that only responsible behavior can ensure the regime's survival and a better life for its citizens. The EU is not a member of the

six-party nuclear talks, but the model of regional cooperation that Europe represents can contribute to peace building on the Korean Peninsula. Asian countries can devise ways to adopt a cooperative security arrangement based on the model of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the world's largest intergovernmental security organization. The OSCE process of fostering security and economic cooperation could be adapted to Northeast Asia: offering guarantees that North Korea would receive substantial economic and diplomatic benefits if it changed its behavior would reassure its leaders that the regime can survive without nuclear weapons.

Given its role as North Korea's principal economic benefactor and ally, China can play a critical part in prompting Pyongyang to change. Chinese efforts to encourage reforms in North Korea could be spurred by a more cooperative U.S.-Chinese relationship. As that relationship deepens, Pyongyang's outlier status will increasingly undermine Beijing's desire to improve its ties with Washington. Conversely, tensions between China and the United States might only increase North Korea's intransigence, allowing it to play the two countries off each other.

Because South Korea maintains both a critical alliance with the United States and a strategic partnership with China, confidence building on the Korean Peninsula would also improve trust between Beijing and Washington, creating a virtuous cycle in which a more cooperative U.S.-Chinese relationship would bolster more positive inter-Korean relations and vice versa. Although North Korea continues to depend heavily on China's economic and diplomatic protection, China's growing

global stature and interest in improving its ties with the United States may limit its support for North Korea if Pyongyang continues to threaten the region's stability. North Korea may finally join the family of nations if it realizes that assistance from China cannot last forever.

MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICE

The dual realities of the Korean Peninsula—prosperity and military tension—have coexisted for the past 60 years. In the midst of war and the bleakest of circumstances, South Korea received critical assistance from the United States and the international community that propelled its economic development and its democratization. Its progress was so fast, in fact, that in 2009 it became the first underdeveloped, aid-recipient country to become a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee. South Korea adheres to denuclearization, participates in countering the proliferation of other weapons of mass destruction, and increasingly contributes to global initiatives, such as reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and antipiracy naval operations around the Horn of Africa.

Enduring trust between the international community and South Korea was instrumental to Seoul's development. To achieve the same outcome with North Korea, South Korea should adopt a principle of *trustpolitik* and an alignment policy. Once the vestiges of the harsh confrontation between Seoul and Pyongyang are overcome, the Korean Peninsula could emerge as a hub for cooperation and economic prosperity. Should the North relinquish its nuclear weapons and behave peacefully, it could work with the South

to enhance economic cooperation between the two countries through special economic zones and the free movement of goods and people, gain development assistance from institutions such as the World Bank, and attract foreign investment. Such developments would contribute significantly to the establishment of a more enduring peace on the Korean Peninsula, and they might expedite the peninsula's unification as well as encourage the gradual institutionalization of economic and security cooperation in Northeast Asia. A democratic, unified Korea would be an economic and security asset to the region.

Many assert that in the coming years the Korean Peninsula will face growing uncertainty. But Koreans have shown that they can turn challenges into historic opportunities. In the 1960s and 1970s, South Korea chose to develop itself through rapid industrialization. In the 1990s, it expanded and deepened ties with countries and regions with which it had shared little during the Cold War, such as China, eastern Europe, and Russia. Over the last decade, it has emerged as one of Asia's most vibrant democracies. Today, South Korea stands ready to work with the United States and other members of the international community to ensure that North Korea follows the same path. 🌐