

# BACKGROUND

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## The U.S. Should Support New South Korean President's Approach to North Korea

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### Abstract

*In late February 2013, Park Geun-hye was inaugurated as the 11th President of South Korea. Park's ascent comes at a critical juncture. Facing several formidable challenges—rising regional security threats, economic uncertainty, and growing pressure to address domestic income disparities—South Korea needs strong and decisive political leadership. While President Park has provided a realistic blueprint for engaging North Korea, Seoul should be resolute in its requirements of conditionality, reciprocity, and transparency from Pyongyang. This year marks the 60th anniversary of the founding of the U.S.–South Korean alliance, a partnership forged in the crucible of war. Now is the time to honor that bond by taking all necessary steps to defend America's allies in the face of growing military threats in Asia.*

In late February 2013, Park Geun-hye was inaugurated as the 11th President of South Korea. Park's ascent comes at a critical juncture in the Republic's history: Facing several formidable challenges—rising regional security threats, economic uncertainty, and growing pressure to address domestic income disparities—South Korea needs strong and decisive political leadership. While President Park is indeed such a leader, her ability to address these challenges will be constrained by a South Korean society that is divided by regional, generational, and ideological factions. The conservative Park must also contend with a large “progressive” segment of the electorate that, if its demands are not met, will quickly take to the streets in protest.

Yet President Park has repeatedly demonstrated her ability to overcome challenges. A principled and unflappable leader with impressive

### KEY POINTS

- U.S. policymakers admire South Korean President Park Geun-hye, who has long extolled the importance of free-market principles, principled conservatism, and maintaining a strong alliance with the United States.
- Park will pursue a principled policy that conditions economic benefits on North Korean behavior.
- President Park's incremental, reciprocal trust-building policy emphasizes that South Korea must first have a robust military to deter further North Korean attacks. Building on that capability, South Korea can then pursue parallel inter-Korean and multilateral negotiations.
- The United States should support Park's pragmatic North Korea policy.
- Washington must concurrently ensure that its military forces and those of its ally are sufficiently strong to defend against Pyongyang's escalating threats and a greater danger of miscalculation by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.
- There should be no doubt in the minds of America's allies and opponents that the United States would defend South Korea.

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political skills, Park has been dubbed the “Queen of Elections,” the result of her not only rescuing the conservative party from imminent political disaster on more than one occasion, but also leading it to victory. Indeed, her presidential triumph came against seemingly insurmountable odds.

Having long extolled the importance of free-market principles, principled conservatism, and a strong alliance with the United States, Park is admired by U.S. policymakers. Of particular importance to the U.S., she will pursue a firm policy toward North Korea, bereft of the naïve unconditional engagement of her progressive predecessors. Park has already advocated a stronger South Korean military contribution to the U.S.–South Korea alliance, particularly in response to recent North Korean attacks and provocations.

At the moment, the bilateral military, political, and economic relationships between the U.S. and South Korea are the strongest they have ever been. Yet several upcoming negotiations are likely to be contentious and could strain relations.<sup>1</sup> Policymakers must take care to prevent disagreements in these negotiations from diverting attention from common security threats.

### **Convincing Victory Among a Divided Electorate**

With a record-high 75.6 percent turnout, Park became the first candidate since South Korea’s democratization in 1987 to win with a majority of votes. Park overcame several significant obstacles, including the low approval ratings of incumbent President Lee Myung-bak (who is from her party), her legacy as the daughter of former dictator Park Chun-hee, and the electorate’s overall shift toward the political Left.

The 2012 South Korean presidential election was determined primarily by economic issues, but whereas the 2007 Korean campaign focused on macroeconomic issues such as the future of the national economy, the 2012 election emphasized the economic well-being of individual citizens. A pledge by all candidates for “economic democratization” to redress economic disparity replaced Lee Myung-bak’s five-year-old “7-4-7” pledge.<sup>2</sup>

Seoul’s policy toward North Korea was also a factor in the election as three developments combined to bring the issue to the forefront of public debate: Pyongyang’s provocative behavior, the radical pro-North platform of the far-Left United Progressive Party, and the stark policy differences between the ruling and opposition parties. As a result, the campaign provided the voters a vivid contrast between the two major candidates’ proposed policies toward North Korea.

Throughout the campaign, the progressive Democratic United Party candidate Moon Jae-in advocated a return to the engagement policies of previous Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. Moon’s policy would have been at odds with that of the United States as well as Six Party Talks’ principles of conditionality, reciprocity, and transparency. U.S. officials privately worried that a Moon victory would cause a resumption of strained bilateral relations that existed under President Roh, for whom Moon served as chief of staff.

By contrast, the conservative Saenuri (New Frontier) Party candidate Park Geun-hye offered a resumption of South Korean benefits but conditioned the extent of such resumption on North Korean behavior. She has also vowed a stern response to any future North Korean attack or provocation. Park’s policy was more pragmatic and less ideological than that of her opponent.

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### **Looking to the Past for Future Lessons**

The 2012 presidential campaign was colored by South Koreans’ growing belief that Seoul must soften its policy toward Pyongyang—a perception driven largely by the lack of progress in inter-Korean relations and heightened tension from North Korean threats.

South Korean progressives extolled the low level of inter-Korean strife during progressive

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1. The Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement (the so-called 123 Agreement) and the Special Measures Agreement (military burden sharing).  
2. Lee pledged to achieve 7 percent annual growth in GDP as well as \$40,000 GDP per capita, and make South Korea the world’s seventh largest economy.

administrations, highlighting the number of inter-Korean meetings and the volume of South Korean aid provided to Pyongyang. Conservatives, on the other hand, emphasized that, despite the level of contacts and largesse, there had been no verifiable progress toward North Korean denuclearization, let alone economic and political reform.

The Kim and Roh policies may indeed have been successful in lowering inter-Korean tensions; after all, promising to augment one's extortion payments doesn't trigger a sharp response from one's captor. Cutting off those payments, on the other hand, does.

### South Korean Engagement with North Korea: A Review

**Kim Dae-jung: Seeking Change Through Sunshine.** President Kim Dae-jung's (1998–2003) "sunshine" policy of engagement was defined by two principal goals: inducing economic and political change in North Korea and moderating regime behavior. Kim postulated that if South Korea provided economic benefits and acted non-confrontationally, North Korea would perceive a reduced threat and eventually reciprocate.

By the end of his term, however, Kim Dae-jung was facing strong domestic criticism over his one-sided engagement policy. Indeed, Kim's reputation was tarnished by the disclosure that his administration had paid \$500 million to attain the inter-Korean summit, an event for which the South Korean president was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Kim believed that Pyongyang's sole rationale for possessing nuclear weapons was to initiate "direct dialogue with the U.S. [to] discuss security assurances, lifting of economic sanctions, and normalization of relations." He argued that North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons once it received a security assurance from the United States.<sup>3</sup> In reality, both the Clinton and Bush Administrations provided several such assurances, but Pyongyang did not abandon its nuclear weapons.

Yet Kim was convinced that the Six-Party Talks would succeed because North Korea "does not have any reason to insist on the possession of nuclear

weapons since the United States has responded to the North's requests for direct dialogue." He predicted that by the end of the Bush Administration in 2008, the nuclear negotiations would be successfully concluded, along with a formal treaty ending the Korean War and the establishment of full diplomatic relations between Washington and Pyongyang.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, the Six-Party Talks collapsed in 2008 because Pyongyang refused to fulfill its obligation to provide a complete and correct date declaration on its nuclear programs and balked at a verification agreement.

### The Six-Party Talks collapsed in 2008 because Pyongyang refused to fulfill its obligation on its nuclear programs and balked at a verification agreement.

**Roh Moo-hyun: Extortion-Based Foreign Policy.** President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) abandoned any pretense of seeking North Korean reform. Instead, he pursued an unconditional outreach to Pyongyang that ran counter to the Six-Party Talks precepts of multilateralism, conditionality, and inducing change in North Korea.

For example, during a May 2006 trip to Mongolia, Roh declared that he was willing to make "many concessions," including providing unconditional aid, in return for an inter-Korean summit.<sup>5</sup> These comments amounted to an abandonment of his previous vows to condition a summit on a North Korean return to and progress in the Six-Party Talks.

Roh returned from the 2007 inter-Korean summit openly admitting his one-sided acquiescence to North Korean demands. "We very naively thought reforms were a good thing," he stated, "and that we could reform the North with Kaesong (joint industrial development project). We were wrong.... We should try to avoid making such misunderstanding by not going on and on about reform and opening up

3. Kim Dae-jung, speech at the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., September 2007.

4. Ibid.

5. "President Roh Pledges to Make Concessions to North Korea," *The Hankyoreh*, May 15, 2008, [http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/123411.html](http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/123411.html) (accessed March 29, 2013).

to North Koreans.”<sup>6</sup> He directed that the Ministry of Unification remove any reference to “reform” on its website or in South Korean policy statements.

During a 2008 interview, Roh underscored the one-sided nature of his engagement policy:

[A]t the Six Party Talks we supported the North Korean position as much as we could. At international conferences, when remarks critical of North Korea arose, we argued for North Korea with as much logic as we could.

We avoided as much as we could statements provoking North Korea. Sometimes, we had to endure even if our pride was hurt.

We did this all to secure trust [with North Korea].

Of course, North Korea did not pay us back quickly. But by doing so, North-South relations expanded greatly.<sup>7</sup>

President Roh was determined to engage Pyongyang—regardless of North Korean behavior. In fact, the Roh administration proudly announced that inter-Korean economic activity *increased* in the fourth quarter of 2006, despite the North’s nuclear test that October. Rather than hold Pyongyang accountable, the Roh administration blamed Washington for triggering the North Korean nuclear crisis, denying U.S. intelligence reports of North Korean nuclear weapons developments. Roh’s Unification Minister Chung Dong-young even dismissed North Korea’s 2005 declaration that it was a nuclear state by claiming that it “couldn’t be independently verified.”<sup>8</sup>

And yet, despite hundreds of inter-Korean meetings and \$6.95 billion in cash, aid, and developmental

assistance provided by South Korea over 10 years,<sup>9</sup> Pyongyang did not reform its economy, alter its political system, or abandon its nuclear weapons programs.

**Lee Myung-bak: Implementing a Principled Engagement Policy.** A Korean proverb states that “a good medicine is bitter to the mouth.” Such was the case with Lee’s strategy toward the North. Lee declared that his policy toward North Korea would be markedly different from the policies of his predecessors. Although Lee vowed to maintain South Korea’s engagement policy, he conditioned economic, humanitarian, and political benefits on tangible progress toward North Korean denuclearization and implementation of political and economic reforms.<sup>10</sup>

**Although Lee Myung-bak vowed to maintain South Korea’s engagement policy, he conditioned benefits on tangible progress toward North Korean denuclearization and implementation of political and economic reforms.**

The phased approach to improving inter-Korean relations would have provided benefits to Pyongyang so long as North Korea took steps along the path to denuclearization. It did not require, as often depicted by progressive critics, complete denuclearization before any benefits would be provided. Specifically, Lee offered to boost North Korean per capita income to \$3,000 in 10 years, establish five free trade areas, establish 100 manufacturing companies, educate 300,000 North Korean workers, and create a \$40 billion international fund to develop the North Korean economy.<sup>11</sup>

6. Ralph A. Cossa, “North-South Summit: Potential Pitfalls Ahead?” *PacNet*, Vol. 41 (October 11, 2007), <http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/pac0741.pdf> (accessed March 29, 2013).
7. Translated and quoted in Robert Koehler, “Shut. The. Hell. Up,” *The Marmot’s Hole*, October 2, 2008, <http://www.rjkoehler.com/2008/10/02/shut-the-hell-up/> (accessed March 29, 2013).
8. Associated Press, “China to Push to Revive N. Korea Talks,” February 14, 2005, <http://coldwarsurvivors.tribe.net/thread/f79a1736-8207-4559-b9d1-4d64edb55ae2>.
9. Bae Jung-ho, “Lee Myung-bak Administration’s North Korea Policy and Inter-Korean Relations,” chap. 2 in *The U.S.-ROK Alliance in the 21st Century*, ed. Bae Jung-ho and Abraham Denmark (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2009), p. 48.
10. Kim Jun Yop, “Lee’s Policy Towards North Korea Will Succeed If Carried Out As Planned,” *The Daily NK*, February 5, 2008, [www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catald=nk01100&num=3221](http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catald=nk01100&num=3221) (accessed March 29, 2013).
11. Yoon Duk-min, “Vision 300, Denuclearization and Openness: Tasks and Prospects,” *East Asian Review*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Summer 2008).

By combining progressive-supported promises of massive benefits with the conservative-supported principle of conditionality, Lee's policy was a less ideological approach than that taken by either of his predecessors. It was also more consistent with the Six-Party Talks goal of using coordinated multilateral diplomatic efforts to leverage implementation of Pyongyang's nuclear commitments.

Predictably, North Korea responded harshly to Lee's policy changes—it had, after all, become accustomed to unconditional South Korean largesse. South Korean progressives also criticized Lee's policy and blamed all subsequent North Korean provocations, including the deadly attacks on the *Cheonan* and *Yeonpyeong-do* in 2010, on what they characterized as a “hard-line” policy. Yet, in return for massive benefits, Lee asked only that Pyongyang abide by the many agreements it had already signed.

### Park Geun-hye's North Korea Strategy

During the presidential campaign, Park Geun-hye distanced herself from Lee Myung-bak's North Korean policy, a move sparked by Lee's declining popularity. Park criticized previous administrations for having chosen an overreliance on either benefits or pressure. Specifically, she commented that progressive administrations that 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.” Similarly, she argued, conservatives that sought to pressure Pyongyang “have not been able to influence its behavior in a meaningful way, either.”<sup>12</sup>

She advocated a new policy—*trustpolitik*—an approach that would “assume a tough line against North Korea sometimes and a flexible policy open to negotiations other times.”<sup>13</sup> Park advocated a step-by-step trust-building process with North

Korea that was “premised on the underpinnings of unshakeable security.”

**Building on a Foundation of Strength.** Park emphasizes that South Korea must first have the robust military capacities necessary to deter further North Korean attacks. Building on that capability, South Korea could then pursue parallel inter-Korean and multilateral negotiations. If Pyongyang responded positively, the Koreas could expand engagement to work toward long-term unification.

Park emphasized that her *trustpolitik* policy “is not a conciliation policy. It is based on strong deterrence.” Therefore, “my highest priority will be placed on safeguarding our nation's sovereignty and national security.” She pledged to deter North Korean provocations by “strengthening comprehensively our military capabilities” and “our deterrence capabilities in order to neutralize North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile threats” with “a strong South Korea–U.S. alliance.” She also vowed to resolutely defend the Northern Limit Line<sup>14</sup> “that has been secured through the ultimate sacrifice of our soldiers.”<sup>15</sup>

Park has made clear that she will respond decisively and exponentially to any new North Korean attacks. She emphasized, “it is important that there should be stern punishment for reckless provocations so as to break the vicious cycle.... [S]trong security is the basis for everything the new government pursues.”<sup>16</sup>

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**Moving Forward with Dialogue.** Based on this theory of credible deterrence, Park has offered Pyongyang an incremental trust-building process characterized by conditional benefits and dialogue.

12. Park Geun-hye, “A New Kind of Korea: Building Trust Between Seoul and Pyongyang,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 5 (September/October 2011), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68136/park-geun-hye/a-new-kind-of-korea?page=show> (accessed March 29, 2013).

13. *Ibid.*

14. The Maritime Limit Line is the maritime dividing line between North and South Korea in the West Sea and was the site of major inter-Korean clashes in 1999, 2002, 2009, and 2010.

15. Park Geun-hye, “*Trustpolitik and the Making of a New Korea*,” address delivered November 15, 2012, <http://www.pii.com/blogs/nk/?p=8088> (accessed March 29, 2013).

16. Yonhap News Agency, “Park Calls for ‘Stern Punishment’ for N. Korean Provocations,” February 22, 2012, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2013/02/22/37/0301000000AEN20130222004951315F.HTML> (accessed March 29, 2013).

If trust can be established—and progress made toward denuclearization—Park has offered to:

- Provide humanitarian assistance to North Korea while promoting mutually beneficial economic, social, and cultural exchanges;
- Pursue “Vision Korea Projects” in tandem with the international community to build an economic community on the Korean Peninsula, advance membership in international financial institutions, and attract foreign investment;
- Assist North Korean electric power, transportation, communication, and other infrastructure projects;
- Improve the livelihood of North Korean citizens through medical and health services, agriculture, forestation, and climate change projects;
- Internationalize the Kaesong Free Industrial Zone and jointly develop mineral resources;
- Initiate mutually reinforcing political–military confidence-building measures;
- Work toward setting up a “South–North Exchange and Cooperation Office” in Seoul and Pyongyang; and
- Meet with the new North Korean leader, although such “a summit must involve an honest dialogue on issues of mutual concern.”<sup>17</sup>

**Prevailing in Policy.** Some experts have perceived Park’s policy as a return to the unconditional acquiescence of the progressive South Korean administrations, but her policy is premised on reciprocal trust-building actions and abiding by international norms of behavior.

In a private meeting with the author, senior Park administration officials commented, “Trust building is not a one-way street. Seoul needs verification, testing, benchmarks, and will proceed one step at a time. It will be a very gradual, phased approach.” They explained that, while Park will delink humanitarian assistance from denuclearization, aid would still be influenced by North Korean actions. Moreover, “without progress in denuclearization and trust building, there will be no mega-projects or major developmental assistance.”<sup>18</sup>

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President Park has described her policy vision as a “dining room table strategy” in which there are a “variety of good, tasty dishes on the table that North Korea can enjoy if it gives up the nuclear program.”<sup>19</sup> North Korea will be given opportunities and assistance if it acts as a responsible member of the international community. However, if the North “pours cold water, it will affect our approach.”<sup>20</sup>

President Park will direct that South Korean humanitarian assistance will now go through the World Food Program. In the past, Seoul was criticized for providing assistance unilaterally with inadequate verification requirements to ensure that it was not diverted to the North Korean military. The Roh Moo-hyun administration even suppressed photos that showed South Korean aid being delivered to North Korean frontline military units stationed along the DMZ.

**Inducing Change in North Korea.** A significant difference between Park Geun-hye’s policy and Roh Moo-hyun’s is that the new conservative president believes the best chance for success lies in “steering North Korea on the path of meaningful

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17. Park Geun-hye, “Korea in a Transforming World: A New Frontier for Peace and Cooperation,” address to the Seoul Foreign Correspondents’ Club, November 8, 2012; Park Geun-hye, “Trustpolitik and the Making of a New Korea.”

18. Author interview with senior Park administration officials, January 2013 (on file).

19. “Park Plays Hardball with NK,” *Korea Times*, April 16, 2012, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/04/113\\_109073.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/04/113_109073.html) (accessed March 29, 2013).

20. J. S. Chang, “Park Warns N. Korea of Regime Collapse If Nuclear Pursuit Continues,” Yonhap News Agency, February 12, 2013; Choe Sang-hun, “New Leader in South Criticizes North Korea,” *The New York Times*, February 12, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/14/world/asia/incoming-south-korean-president-steps-up-criticism-of-pyongyang.html> (accessed March 29, 2013).

change.”<sup>21</sup> Eschewing the progressive party’s unwillingness to confront Pyongyang over its horrendous human rights violations, Park stated that Seoul should pass a North Korean human rights bill to encourage significant improvement in North Korea’s humanitarian and human rights conditions.

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## The best chance for success lies in “steering North Korea on the path of meaningful change.”

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By contrast, the progressive opposition Democratic United Party continues to resist a North Korean human rights bill, deriding it as a “diplomatic discourtesy.” In a throwback to the Roh administration’s timidity in confronting North Korea’s brutal repression of its citizens, DUP legislator and former Prime Minister Lee Hae-chan declared that “it is not desirable to interfere in domestic affairs of other countries (via legislation).”<sup>22</sup>

### Assessing Park’s North Korea Policy

Many South Korean progressives are depicting Park’s North Korea policy as a fundamental departure from that of Lee Myung-bak. By projecting their views onto Park’s policy, progressives seek to transfer blame for North Korean intransigence and provocations from their party’s failings to Lee’s supposedly unreasonable, hard-line policies.

But Park’s proposals actually indicate far greater policy continuity; they are, in essence, Lee’s policies but with a single “Get Out of Jail Free” card to be played by North Korea in the event of further bad behavior. Like Lee, Park promises “to enhance economic cooperation [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” on the condition that North Korea “relinquish its nuclear weapons and behave peacefully.”<sup>23</sup>

Similar to Lee’s policies, Park’s approach also requires that “South Korea must first demonstrate,

through a robust and credible deterrent posture, that it will no longer tolerate North Korea’s increasingly violent provocations” and must “show Pyongyang that the North will pay a heavy price for its military and nuclear threats.... This approach...must be enforced more vigorously than in the past.”<sup>24</sup>

A senior Park official explained privately that there will be two principal differences between Lee’s and Park’s North Korea policy: (1) an open effort to maintain inter-Korean contact and (2) a focus on refraining from making provocative statements toward the North, a criticism often lobbed at Lee. For example, while Lee publicly commented on alliance contingency planning for the collapse of the North Korean regime, Park will continue the planning but not comment on it. Nor will Park’s administration have secret talks with North Korea as Lee’s administration did.

### Ever-Present Danger of Military Clash

Despite initial naïve hopes that Kim Jong-un would pursue a more benign foreign policy, he has instead shown himself to be just as belligerent and dangerous as his predecessors. During Jong-un’s reign, North Korea has thrice violated United Nations Security Council resolutions and stepped up its threats against the United States and South Korea.

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Indeed, in recent months, North Korea’s behavior has grown even more bellicose. For example, Pyongyang abrogated the armistice ending the Korean War as well as all inter-Korean nonaggression pacts. North Korea publicly declared that it already has the capability to hit the United States with nuclear weapons. And on March 6, the North Korean foreign ministry threatened a “pre-emptive nuclear attack [with] lighter and smaller nuclear

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21. Park Geun-hye, “Korea in a Transforming World.”

22. “Ideological Rift Deepens Among Parties,” *Korea Herald*, June 7, 2012, <http://www.intellasia.net/ideological-rift-deepens-among-parties-207436> (accessed March 29, 2013).

23. Park Geun-hye, “A New Kind of Korea.”

24. Ibid.

weapons unlike what they had in the past” to turn Washington and Seoul into a “sea of flames.”<sup>25</sup>

The Supreme Command of the Korean People’s Army has threatened the U.S. and South Korea with “*diversified* precision nuclear strikes of Korean style.”<sup>26</sup> “Diversified” is presumed to mean that North Korea has developed both plutonium- and uranium-based nuclear weapons. The Korean People’s Army vowed, “We are fully prepared to strike at will any target, at any time, with no limitation.”<sup>27</sup> Pyongyang subsequently threatened to restart the Yongbyon nuclear reactor and to close the joint North–South Korean Kaesong economic venture, declared that the peninsula had entered a “state of war,” and recommended that foreign diplomats depart the country.

The Korea conundrum is that North Korea has backed down from previous threats and at other times has carried them out. Therefore, North Korea’s bombastic rhetoric cannot be easily dismissed. The North’s two deadly attacks in 2010 against a South Korean naval vessel and a civilian island are a deadly reminder of the regime’s capabilities and intentions.

While no one envisions North Korea carrying out a nuclear attack on the United States, Pyongyang will use its nuclear muscle to intimidate Washington and its allies. Even before North Korea developed nuclear weapons and the missiles required to deliver them, Pyongyang attacked South Korean and U.S. targets with impunity. Seoul and Washington feared that even tactical-level retaliation could escalate into all-out war.

The actual extent of North Korea’s nuclear and long-range missile capabilities is unknown, but experts have frequently underestimated Pyongyang. After all, some experts intent on continuing to advocate engagement with the recalcitrant regime initially dismissed North Korea’s uranium-based nuclear weapons program, its role in

constructing a Syrian nuclear reactor, and its long-range missiles.

**Greater Risk of Miscalculation and Escalation.** With new leaders at the helm in both Koreas, the risk of miscalculation and escalation has increased. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un lacks experience and may stumble across red lines that his predecessors would have known not to cross. He may also be emboldened by the knowledge that neither the U.S. nor South Korea responded militarily in any significant way to previous North Korean acts of terrorism or war.

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South Korean President Park Geun-hye has made her position clear, declaring, “In the case of any further North Korean provocations, I am prepared to activate all possible means within the boundaries of self-defense.” The South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff warned that it would respond to a North Korean attack by “forcefully and decisively strik[ing] not only the point of origin of provocation and its supporting forces but also its command leadership.”<sup>28</sup> A Ministry of Defense official explained that, in the case of a tactical artillery strike in the West Sea, Seoul might attack the Fourth Corps regional command headquarters rather than simply targeting a few artillery batteries.<sup>29</sup>

Seoul *should* retaliate the next time North Korea attacks. U.S. and South Korean reluctance to respond to Pyongyang’s repeated terrorist attacks, presidential assassination attempts, acts of war, and murder has only emboldened the regime to continue its heinous behavior.

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25. Choe Sang-hun, “North Korea Warns of Pre-emptive Nuclear Attack,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2013.
  26. 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](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/06/world/asia/north-korea-threatens-to-attack-us-with-lighter-and-smaller-nukes.html?_r=0) (accessed March 30, 2013). Emphasis added.
  27. North Korea Leadership Watch, “UNSC Approves New Sanctions for DPRK’s 3rd Nuclear Test,” March 8, 2013, <http://nkleadershipwatch.wordpress.com/2013/03/07/unsc-approves-new-sanctions-for-dprks-3rd-nuclear-test/> (accessed March 29, 2013).
  28. Choe Sang-hu, “South Korea Pushes Back on North’s Threats,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/07/world/asia/seoul-says-north-korea-leadership-could-be-target.html> (accessed March 30, 2013).
  29. Kim Kyu-won, “Seoul Pledges Retaliation to North Korea’s Threat to Cancel Armistice Agreement,” *Hankroyeh*, March 6, 2013, <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/ENGISSUE/105/577002.html> (accessed March 30, 2013).
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But U.S. and South Korean policymakers should also be aware that Park's policy, though welcome, does carry a commensurate increased risk of conflict escalation. Even before Park's election, Seoul had implemented steps after the Yeonpyeong Island attacks that augmented its retaliatory capabilities.

Lee Myung-bak loosened the military rules of engagement for the West Sea area to allow immediate and broader retaliation. He also pushed the authority to respond down to a lower command echelon. South Korean officials commented that Seoul had replaced the previous 1:1 response ratio with a 3:1 attack ratio: i.e., that Seoul would attack three artillery batteries for every one battery that fired on the South.

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## There is now little optimism that diplomacy would be successful—and how could it be, given North Korea's long-standing refusal to abide by its commitments?

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In an interview during his last month in office, President Lee commented that at the time of the Yeonpyeong attack, he ordered the Air Force to strike North Korean targets, but a high-ranking military official blocked him, saying that the Air Force could not get involved per the rules of engagement and that they needed to consult with the Americans. Lee commented that the Obama Administration initially opposed his plan to expand retaliation to support units but eventually agreed.<sup>30</sup>

**It Takes Two to Tango.** Irrespective of the pragmatism of Park Geun-hye's policy, North Korea's rejection of dialogue threatens to leave the new president standing alone on the geopolitical dance floor. There is now little optimism that diplomacy would be successful—and how could it be, given North Korea's long-standing refusal to abide by its commitments, its willingness to abandon potential benefits by attacking South Korea, and Pyongyang's public declarations that it will never return to negotiations or abandon its nuclear weapons?

Kim Jong-un has clearly demonstrated that he will continue the threatening foreign policy of his predecessors. Indeed, the regime may feel strengthened in its belligerence because it has weathered the international community's previous meek efforts at punishing Pyongyang for its misbehavior.

### Next Steps for Seoul

**Enhance South Korean defenses.** Pyongyang's repeated violations of international law and military attacks undermined previous attempts at engagement. South Korea, in concert with the United States, should take steps to guard against North Korean nuclear, missile, and conventional force attacks. Specifically, Seoul should:

- Fully fund defense requirements. Budget shortfalls have always undermined attempts to reform South Korea's military. For any defense reform initiatives to take hold, Seoul must ensure legislative approval of necessary laws and sufficient budgetary resources.
- Implement Defense Reform Plan 1230 to prepare South Korea for assuming wartime operational command. Developing a clearly defined unified command structure would enable Seoul to synchronize selected combat power from all of South Korea's military services.
- Deploy a multilayered missile defense system. Such a system should be interoperable with a U.S. regional missile network to provide for a more coherent and effective defense of allied military facilities and the South Korean populace. This system would include acquiring and deploying PAC-3 ground-based missiles and SM-3 missiles and augmenting missile defense planning and exercises with the U.S. and Japan.
- Improve command, control, communication, computer, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities to enable integrated combat capabilities down to the tactical level.
- Enhance long-range precision-strike capabilities, including fifth-generation fighter aircraft, attack

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30. Dae-young Kwon, "President Lee: Strong Retaliation Will Be Made," *Chosun Ilbo*, February 5, 2013, [http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2013/02/05/2013020500132.html?news\\_top](http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/02/05/2013020500132.html?news_top) (accessed April 8, 2013).

helicopters, precision-guided munitions, extended-range surface-to-surface missiles, and counter-battery radar and artillery systems.

**Pursue conditional engagement with North Korea.** There is little expectation that another attempt at engagement will be successful, but even a failed effort by Park could be beneficial since it could undermine domestic critics who always seek to blame others for North Korea's belligerence and refusal to fulfill its commitments.

President Barack Obama's concerted attempt at engagement in 2009 caused a belated epiphany among U.S. experts that Pyongyang, rather than American policy, was to blame for the stalemate. This in turn enabled the Obama Administration to impose greater sanctions on Pyongyang than President Bush had been able to achieve. A similar attempt by Park could lead to greater domestic support for implementing more effective efforts against North Korean violations.

**Engage in inter-Korean diplomacy.** With regard to diplomacy on the peninsula, South Korea should:

- Emphasize that the Northern Limit Line is the inter-Korean maritime boundary and that South Korea's sovereignty will not be abrogated through vague and one-sided "peace zones."
- Defer North Korea peace treaty overtures until sufficient progress is achieved on denuclearization. An inviolable precondition for such negotiations would be the inclusion of conventional force reductions and confidence-building measures such as prior notification of major military deployments, movements, and exercises.
- Denounce North Korea's human rights abuses, approve North Korean human rights legislation, call on Beijing to abandon repatriating North Korean defectors and allow visits by the U.N. rapporteur on North Korean human rights to investigate refugee conditions in northeast China, and encourage China, Mongolia, and Southeast Asian nations to facilitate travel by North Korean refugees.
- Expand allied public diplomacy efforts to increase North Korea's exposure to the outside

world and induce transformation of the regime, as took place in Communist Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Expand broadcasting services and distribution of leaflets, DVDs, computer flash drives, documentaries, and movies into North Korea through both overt and covert means.

**Engage the North economically.** Specifically, South Korea should:

- Provide humanitarian aid.
  1. The level of emergency food aid should be determined by international aid organization assessment of North Korean needs based on in-country inspections. Aid should be delivered directly to needy recipients rather than to the North Korean government and subject to rigorous monitoring requirements.
  2. The scope of donations should be influenced by North Korean provocative acts and threats and conditioned on reciprocity on progress in issues of importance to Seoul, such as North Korea's retention of 500 POWs and 500 post-war abductees and the expanded scope and pace of separated family reunions.
- Provide developmental assistance.
  1. Assistance should be subject to standard requirements of international financial institutions. Initial contributions should be project-based, and any extensive, long-term assistance should be tied to North Korean economic reform and increasing transparency.
  2. Undertake only economically viable, rather than politically motivated, projects.

**Impose punitive measures.** Seoul should target North Korean and other nations' individuals, banks, businesses, and government agencies that are violating U.N. resolutions and international law. Doing so would increase the cost to North Korea if Pyongyang continues to defy the international community.

Seoul should make clear that planned expansions of the inter-Korean joint business venture at Kaesong will not take place until Pyongyang begins to address South Korean security concerns. If North

Korea again attacks, South Korea should sever all involvement in the Kaesong business venture, terminate all economic engagement with North Korea, and suspend purchase of all North Korean products. South Korea is Pyongyang's second largest trading partner, accounting for 30 percent of North Korea's overall trade.

President Lee Myung-bak curtailed most inter-Korean economic engagement after the results of the Cheonan investigation were made public, but he exempted Kaesong. This was a mistake that should have been rectified after the Yeonpyeong Island attack.

### What the U.S. Should Do

**Support South Korea taking the lead.** The U.S. should encourage South Korean attempts at engagement. Given the failure of its earlier attempts, there is little incentive for the Obama Administration to try to re-engage North Korea. Regrettably, there is similarly little inclination on the part of the Obama Administration to take resolute action against North Korea for its repeated violations and provocations. Instead, the Administration appears to be satisfied with minimalist punishment delivered amid bold claims of "exceptional" measures that "significantly expand the scope of sanctions."<sup>31</sup>

Washington has a high comfort level with President Park, the result of her strong past support for the alliance and principled views toward North Korea. Seoul therefore has some room to maneuver with regard to North Korea. Park's policy is a sound one since its offer of outreach is based on a strong defense of the country. Washington should support both pillars of Park's policy: conditional outreach combined with strong defenses against the spectrum of North Korean military threats.

**Increase pressure on Pyongyang.** North Korea's successful rocket and nuclear tests and its menacing military threats show that the time for incremental responses and relying on the U.N. is past. Congress has become sufficiently exasperated with the listlessness of U.S. policy to call on the executive branch to use its existing, formidable tools to pressure North Korea.

It is past time for the U.S. to take action against North Korea's illegal activities; its nuclear and

missile programs; and any complicit foreign individual, bank, business, or government agency. Washington did implement an effective multifaceted program against North Korea during the Bush Administration, but the Bush Administration unwisely abandoned this program in order to improve the negotiating atmosphere. Since that time, law enforcement efforts also appear to have atrophied.

**Encourage South Korea to improve relations with Japan.** Relations between America's key allies remain strained by unresolved historic and sovereignty issues. Washington should privately counsel Seoul and Tokyo to take steps to ameliorate or at least isolate contentious issues to enable forward-looking security policies. Both President Park and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe have a realistic sense of the growing security threats in Asia.

The U.S. should also encourage Park and Abe to minimize the impact of strong nationalist emotions currently running rampant in their countries. A first step would be to create the political atmosphere necessary to enable the signing of an intelligence-sharing agreement similar to the one canceled in June 2012.

### Supporting a Critical Partnership Forged in Blood

Seoul should offer to reach out to North Korea through both bilateral and multilateral negotiations, but Seoul must not acquiesce to North Korean pressure tactics. Being excessively eager to compromise, as demonstrated by previous progressive administrations, not only rewards abhorrent behavior, but also undermines negotiating leverage.

President Park Geun-hye has provided a realistic blueprint for engaging North Korea. In following these policies, Seoul should be resolute in its requirements of conditionality, reciprocity, and transparency from Pyongyang. South Korea's outreach should be grounded in both strong national defenses and firm support from the United States.

There should be no doubt in the minds of America's allies and opponents that the United States will fulfill its treaty obligations to South Korea. While the Obama Administration has been stalwart in its rhetoric pledging an "Asia Pivot," it

31. Ambassador Susan Rice, address to the United Nations, March 5, 2013, <http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/unifeed/2013/03/un-dprk-9/> (accessed March 30, 2013).

has not provided the military resources to implement such a strategy. Quite simply, there is no pivot, as no U.S. forces withdrawn from Iraq, Afghanistan, or Europe will be redeployed to the Pacific. In fact, massive defense budget cuts threaten to undermine existing U.S. capabilities.

This year marks the 60th anniversary year of the founding of the U.S.–South Korean alliance—a

partnership forged in blood and the crucible of war. Now is the time to honor that bond by taking all necessary steps to defend America’s allies in the face of growing military threats in Asia.

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