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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **A New China Policy for South Korea: Options for President-elect Park**

By Sukjoon Yoon

### **Synopsis**

*President-elect Park Geun Hye will need a new approach towards North Korea and China that differs from her predecessor's hard-line policy. The new administration must reengage with Pyongyang as part of a broader strategic détente with China, whilst remaining close to the US.*

### **Commentary**

NORTHEAST ASIA seems to have had enough of confrontation and friction. Throughout the region, from China to Korea and Japan, new administrations have recently been chosen. Remarkably, they have all spoken in support of regional peace and cooperation, apparently moving beyond the political confrontations of 2010-2012 which proved so divisive.

Across the varied political systems, the new leaders of Northeast Asia - Xi Jinping of China, Shinzo Abe of Japan, and Park Geun Hye of South Korea - are all dynastic successors. This generation of leaders is focusing on new issues, notably on ensuring stability by increased social welfare and health provision, despite the slowdown in their economies. With this shift of emphasis they may feel able to take a more moderate approach to sovereignty issues, and there have been some signals of a willingness to repair ties.

### **New spirit of cooperation?**

Initially, however, they may face opposition from more conservative forces including radical nationalists. As the current maritime territorial disputes have become more volatile and violent the new leaders have already sought to restrain internal tensions among their citizens.

These new administrations prefer negotiations to conflicts, and seem likely to eschew the tactics which produced the existing friction and mistrust. Even the young North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, recently made an extraordinary appeal for improved relations with the South. There seems to be a new spirit arising, throughout the Northeast Asian region, of "live and let live".

The policy of the Republic of Korea (ROK) toward China during the Lee Myung-bak presidency has been constrained by the strategy toward North Korea. In this moment of political transition across Northeast Asia, and in the United States, there is an opportunity, through a new and cooperative vision to build trust.

## Sino-American rivalry

Whether or not President-elect Park agrees with this analysis, her new government will face several serious strategic quandaries while having to reengage North Korea. Somehow the unsettling rise of China must be moderated and the unwelcome decline of US power and influence must be accommodated. These complexities mandate a more engaged foreign policy approach for Park.

During Park's campaign, two issues emerged to the fore: social welfare and North Korea. Her policies on the former drew the support of the middle class, and on the latter gained the votes of traditional conservative groups. She has proposed a "confidence-building process in the Korean peninsula", she wants to move on from the terrible times of the Cheonan sinking and the Yeonpyeong island bombardment, and to reallocate government spending from defence to social security.

The Lee presidency's hard-line approach to North Korea has lost its appeal, and the new president, despite her right-wing heritage and support, is proposing a trust-oriented strategy toward North Korea that is closer to the "Sunshine Policy" promoted by former left-of-centre governments.

The original "Sunshine Policy" was the brainchild of former president and Nobel Peace Laureate Kim Dae Jung. Lee Myung Bak was elected as a vigorous opponent of this approach toward the North, and throughout his administration Beijing was reluctant to coordinate with Seoul on North Korean issues like nuclear weapons development and the testing of long-range rocketry. The only crumb that Beijing allowed was a change in the relationship with Seoul, from "strategic partnership" to "strategic cooperative partnership". Many analysts are wondering who is supposed to be responsible for the "cooperative" aspect.

Park is the first woman president of any country with a Confucian ethos, and the first South Korean president fluent in Chinese. These factors, together with her "aristocratic" family background (as the daughter of President Park Chung Hee) may help her relate to Xi Jinping who is himself a "princeling". Park apparently understands that her administration needs to do something to produce more cooperative outcomes, and the ROK's 2013 budget, published late last year, increases the funds for projects related to North Korea, as promised during her campaign.

More broadly, the Park administration must strike a balance between the rise of China and the decline of the US, which will require strategic deftness and sensitivity. But the ROK's relations with the US and China need not be a zero-sum game: the relaxation of ideological constraints should lead to a general improvement in Sino-Korean interactions, which will also allow a fine tuning of the US-ROK security alliance.

The ROK, as a middle power, should be neutral over the rivalry between the US and China. The most effective route to strategic autonomy for the ROK may be to formulate a "trilateral cooperation mechanism" between China, the ROK and the US. Such a creative approach to the complex problems of regional security would create gains for all parties, not least for the ROK itself. The ROK's new China policy can contribute to defusing the North Korean issue in a manner acceptable to both China and the US.

### Two caveats for Korea's China policy

There are, however, two necessary conditions for Korea's new China policy. Firstly, the incoming Park administration will need a sophisticated approach if it is to identify a fresh and constructive space between the rise of China and the waning influence of the US in the region. It must be ready to seize the opportunity for a foreign policy breakthrough, to bring about a real thaw in relations. Thus, the new government's special envoy has called China an "indispensable catalyst", and the ROK now sees its relationship with China as the cornerstone of burgeoning and mutually beneficial economic interactions, based on geographic proximity. Park has indicated her urgent diplomatic focus upon China.

Secondly, it would be very helpful if a China-ROK "Senior Dialogue for Strategic Communication" could be established, (like that between China and the US). The opaque structure of China's political system is a confusing tangle of overlapping influence and responsibility, with power shared between party and state, and between central and local government. Such a Senior Dialogue would be able to balance chronic threats, like the standoff between the two Koreas, against acute issues, like the delimitation of overlaps between their Exclusive Economic Zones. Other major issues include illegal fishing by Chinese trawlers beyond the Northern Limit Line, and judicial proceedings; procedures for the proposed ROK-China Free Trade Agreement; and the structural transformation of bilateral trade.

The two countries could also work jointly to project a new vision of strategic opportunity and to demonstrate how they can work together in the twenty-first century. Ultimately, the true significance of all these frictions, complexities and interactions between China and the ROK can be expressed by a single word: trust. Both sides

need to work harder at building a deeper bond of trust, which is indispensable for any further enhancement of relations between China and ROK.

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