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Tensions on the Korean Peninsula: Will Park's *Trustpolitik* Work?

By Sarah Teo

Synopsis

South Korean President Park Geun-hye's approach to build trust between North and South Korea is being tested. With Pyongyang's recent warlike rhetoric, Seoul's trustpolitik policy looks unlikely to achieve its goal of improving inter-Korean relations.

Commentary

AMIDST ONGOING war threats by North Korea, South Korean President Park Geun-hye's *trustpolitik* approach towards Pyongyang was put into action last week. As Seoul and Washington inked a military contingency plan detailing a joint military response to provocations by Pyongyang, South Korea announced plans for the first shipment of private humanitarian aid under the Park administration to North Korea.

These moves are motivated by President Park's North Korea policy. In a Foreign Affairs article outlining the approach last September, she called for *trustpolitik* to "transform the Korean Peninsula from a zone of conflict into a zone of trust". She wrote that "[e]ven 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" by improving inter-Korean relations. Specifically, an "alignment policy" would see Seoul "assuming a tough line against North Korea sometimes and a flexible policy open to negotiations other times."

A 'new beginning' with North Korea?

To date, Pyongyang has not appeared receptive to Seoul's *trustpolitik* policy. Instead, recent weeks have seen the North Korean leadership ratcheting up its threats against South Korea and the United States. Last Saturday, North Korea announced that it was in a "state of war" with the South, and warned that Washington and Seoul were leading the Korean peninsula into a nuclear conflict. With the heightened tensions on the peninsula, *trustpolitik* seems unlikely to achieve its goal of improving inter-Korean relations.

President Park's offer to Pyongyang to build a "new beginning" is premised on economic cooperation and humanitarian assistance. She is willing to conduct dialogue with Pyongyang, and has pledged economic support to North Korea on the condition that it abandons its nuclear programmes.

In its first despatch of private humanitarian aid to North Korea, the Park administration assigned tuberculosis medicine worth 678 million won (US\$606,500), expected to be delivered in April. President Park is also open to

the possibility of resuming official aid to the North. Under her predecessor Lee Myung-bak, Seoul terminated government food and fertilisers shipments to Pyongyang.

If successful, these measures would help build an environment of trust on the Korean peninsula. The hope is that the trust created from aid provision and economic ties would spill over to security issues. Only when Pyongyang has a vested interest to maintain regional peace and stability, and acts as such, would its threat level towards South Korea decrease. Eventually, Seoul aims to bring the reclusive state into the international fold.

Responding ‘more strongly’ to Pyongyang’s provocations

Providing aid and improving economic ties comprises only half of President Park’s approach. At the same time, Seoul is working to boost its deterrence against provocations from its northern neighbour.

Reports note that the recently signed Combined Counter-Provocation Plan would allow the US to provide support to South Korean forces against localised provocations carried out by the North. The existing mutual defence treaty between the US and South Korea, signed in 1953, provides for US military involvement only if a full-scale war erupts. According to the South Korean military, the new joint action plan would enable Seoul to respond “more strongly” to Pyongyang’s hostilities than before.

The pact is one of the latest in a series of actions taken by Seoul and Washington, sending a strong message to Pyongyang to cease provocations. In October 2012, the two allies reached an agreement to extend the range of South Korea’s ballistic missiles to 800 kilometres, effectively covering the whole of North Korea. During the annual US-South Korea military exercise Foal Eagle in March, a US nuclear-capable B-52 bomber flew over South Korea in an attempt to highlight US extended deterrence capabilities in the region. Meanwhile, South Korean troops on the ground have been given orders to return fire if provoked, without having to seek permission from the military top brass.

The forceful response towards North Korea indicates that Seoul will no longer tolerate Pyongyang’s belligerent actions and rhetoric. If the Kim regime persists in its provocations, it would face tougher military measures from both South Korea and the US. While such deterrence is not new, the Park administration is calling for a stronger enforcement of this approach – as reflected in the recent actions taken by Seoul and Washington.

Pyongyang’s response

Seoul hopes that its *trustpolitik* strategy could change Pyongyang’s mindset. At present, however, the Kim regime seems to be responding with heightened bellicosity, especially to South Korea’s strengthening of its military deterrence. Pyongyang has also carried out actions which are a cause for regional concern.

Since December 2012, North Korea has conducted a ballistic missile test and its third nuclear test, annulled the 1953 armistice agreement temporarily ceasing the Korean War, as well as cut off all military hotlines with the South. Analysts are divided on the significance of these actions. On the one hand, the North’s rhetoric and action over the last few months indicate its intent. Apart from declaring a “state of war” with Seoul, Pyongyang has also indicated its readiness to attack US military bases in the Asia-Pacific.

On the other hand, North Korea is known for its brinkmanship. Rhetorical threats against the South occur almost on a daily basis, and Pyongyang has several times since the 1990s signalled its intention to declare, or declared invalid the 1953 armistice agreement. Against these mixed interpretations, the Kaesong industrial complex is an important barometer of inter-Korean relations. Although Pyongyang has warned that it may shut down the only co-operative project between the two Koreas, the fact that border factories remain open is a positive sign.

Given the tenuous situation on the Korean peninsula, Seoul has to tread a fine balance between the two approaches of its *trustpolitik* strategy. It is no easy task to enforce a stronger military posture on the one hand, and reach out to North Korea with aid and assistance on the other. Any misstep or miscalculation could result in disastrous consequences.

Importantly, communication links between Pyongyang and Seoul should be maintained at all times – even if the Kim regime remains unreceptive to the Park administration’s *trustpolitik* policy. Uninterrupted contact would help ensure that events do not escalate, and also contribute to the trust-building process on the peninsula.

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