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Prospects for President Park's Trustpolitik

By Sukjoon Yoon

Synopsis

After 100 days in power, public approval of South Korean President Park Geun-hyae's foreign policy is at an unprecedented high of 60%. Despite North Korea's military provocations and unrelenting rhetoric, most people seem ready to give her signature trustpolitik the benefit of the doubt.

Commentary

SOUTH KOREANS feel safe - at least for the time being - making light of North Korea's continuing rhetorical and military threats. Following President Park Geun-hyae's recent successful visit to Washington, and ahead of her trip to Beijing later this month, some commentators have painted the future of the ROK-US alliance in glowing terms. It is seen as an everlasting military-security alliance structure capable of surviving even the sudden unification of the Korean peninsula.

In reality, however, the sole purpose of the alliance, which has a single command and control system and is therefore binational rather than bilateral, is to deter North Korea from initiating another Korean War.

China's perspective

Park, who is scheduled to travel to Beijing on 27 June for summit talks with President Xi Jinping, is thought to enjoy a close personal rapport with the new leader. So what is China putting on the table?

Beijing may accept the South Korean proposal for a "strategic cooperative partnership concerning North Korean issues", relinquishing the primary responsibility for restarting inter-Korean dialogue. This implies much warmer relations between Seoul and Beijing, perhaps, in the longer term, becoming more like those between Seoul and Washington.

Beijing's relations with Pyongyang are clearly at a crossroads, though it remains unclear whether there will be any lasting changes. But there are signals that China wants to move toward a more comprehensive regional and global perspective. For example, the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) were allowed to visit the operations centre of China's North Sea Fleet earlier this month.

China seems ready to join the "Trilateral Strategic Dialogue between China, US and South Korea" to deal with North Korean emergencies. In March this year, the South Korean and US militaries agreed a plan to deter conventional military provocations by North Korea, so any sudden turmoil on the Korean Peninsula may occasion more US military involvement.

And the mutual friendship treaty signed between Beijing and Pyongyang in 1951 allows China to intervene directly if North Korea comes under external attack. So the knock-on consequences of continued saber-rattling by the North are unpredictable – would China ditch its long-time ally? Fortunately the US and China are stepping up consultations on these issues.

China is coming closer to the US in its ideas about the future of the Korean Peninsula, as the joint statement from the US-China summit on 6-7 June made clear. China now acknowledges North Korea as a source of instability in Northeast Asia, chastising Pyongyang for their nuclear blackmail and their conventional threats against South Korea. The US and China are currently reappraising their strategic relations, which they hope will lead to more cooperation between the two great powers. If they can agree on how to manage North Korea, then South Korea will surely tag along.

Park's agenda for China visit

Park needs to address three key objectives on her visit to Beijing. Firstly, she should identify the grand strategy behind China's rise: how do the Chinese view the future of the region, and how will they share power with the US? South Korea can cooperate with China on Beijing's regional strategy, especially regarding North Korea, to develop a relationship as broad and deep as the ROK-US strategic alliance.

Secondly, she could invite the Chinese to buy-in to a "One Korea Policy" based on President Park's *trustpolitik* in which North Korea is given social and economic support en route to a peaceful unification. Just as Deng Xiaoping successfully managed tensions with Taiwan and Hong Kong through his "One China Policy", the current Chinese leadership would allow Park to initiate a process to unify the two Koreas within a rules-based framework.

Thirdly, she must clarify the details of her *trustpolitik*, for example: that South Korea should take the lead in managing North Korea, and therefore in maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Also, the North would not be asked to immediately abandon its existing nuclear weapons, but only to refrain from expanding its arsenal, since, as matters stand, it seems impossible for Pyongyang to discard its only strategic leverage.

Unlike previous policies toward North Korea, Park's *trustpolitik* is rethinking this paradigm as a series of incremental steps. Rather than having to choose between stability and denuclearisation, the goal is to provide stability through a structured process including gradual denuclearisation. And this approach should suit China, which has always valued stability much more than denuclearisation.

Can Park prevail?

Park's *trustpolitik* offers social-economic development, sponsored by the South, in exchange for peace and partnership; but will this policy fare any better than the earlier approaches? North Korea, because of its economic weakness and to preserve its regime, is unlikely to start another Korean War. But it can still make considerable local trouble for South Korea. The possibility of some sort of attack should not be neglected, especially after Park's visit to Washington in March prompted much hyperbolic rhetoric, though Pyongyang routinely takes offence at any demonstration of the strength of the ROK-US alliance.

Park must not drop the ball in the interval before her visit to Beijing. She must press on with *trustpolitik*, despite the possibility of a Beijing visit by Kim Jung-un, as implied by the recent mission there of a North Korean special envoy, Lt. General Choe Younghae. This is despite the distraction of Presidents Xi and Obama discussing North Korea at their recent California summit. General Choe's visit seems to be a rear-guard action to persuade Beijing to keep its distance from Seoul and to express a willingness to take Chinese advice in making changes.

Park needs to find a way to cut the Gordian Knot on the Korean peninsula by moving closer to China without slighting the US, and her *trustpolitik* offers a gradualist strategy with space for creative ambiguity. Now that China's power and influence begin to rival that of the US, South Korea's policy toward the North must move beyond simple military containment to encompass preventive diplomacy.

Park must take every opportunity for dialogue, and as nothing is more essential than that Beijing should change its attitude towards Pyongyang, Park must work tirelessly for such a breakthrough.

Captain (Ret.) Sukjoon Yoon is a Senior Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy (KIMS) and Visiting Professor of the Department of Defence System Engineering, Sejong University, Seoul. A former director of maritime strategy studies at the Naval War College, he contributed this specially to RSIS Commentaries.