



BULLETIN

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The New South Korean President's Foreign Policy Directions

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The new South Korean President Park Geun-hye's foreign policy focuses on pursuing a more balanced approach towards North Korea compared to the hard-line policy presented by her predecessor, fortifying the alliance with the U.S., and heightening relations with China and Japan. Nevertheless, recent provocations from Pyongyang pose a challenge for the moderate policy to the North she presented in the campaign. Park's efforts to ameliorate regional security concerns are in the EU's interest. They provide a foothold from which the EU can expand its visibility in the region, secure its economic interests and actively support the reconciliation in Asia by sharing experience.

On 25 February, Park Geun-hye was sworn in as the new president of South Korea (ROK). As the head of the ruling Saenuri party, in December 2012 she was elected the first female president of the country. Earlier, in April 2012, her party won the parliamentary election. Although the presidential campaign concentrated on economic problems, including lower than expected economic growth, rising welfare disparities and income polarisation, all of which will remain Park's top priority, the ROK's foreign and defence agenda seems to be crucial for regional stability, taking into account simmering territorial disputes and the threat from North Korea. Accordingly, inter-Korean relations, regional cooperation, and alliance with the U.S. are to be Park's foreign policy hot-button issues. In her address during the inauguration ceremony, Park outlined her policy priorities.

The Korean Peninsula. North Korea remains central to South Korean foreign policy. It seems indisputable that relations with the North (DPRK) will be a key element of the new president's diplomatic agenda. Both during her campaign and after the election, she declared that she would pursue a more balanced approach towards Kim's regime, compared to the policy of her predecessor, President Lee Myung-bak.

Park's North Korea policy proposal was crafted in such a way as to be distinct from Lee's hard-line approach, and the softer approaches of his two predecessors, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. Both policies have been acknowledged as failures. The stance by Kim and Roh, known as the Sunshine Policy (1998–2008), was based on launching inter-Korean dialogue, emphasis on separation of economy and politics, and gave special attention to making Pyongyang less isolated and reinvigorating business cooperation, humanitarian assistance and preliminary talks on far-future reunification. The disadvantage of this approach lay in unconditional aid (the lack of denuclearisation as a precondition for assistance), which indulged North Korea while yielding no tangible advances in resolving the issue of the DPRK's nuclear programme. Lee, on the other hand, presented a tougher posture than his predecessors. His policy sharpened notably in 2010 after provocative behaviour from North Korea—the sinking of a South Korean patrol ship and the shelling of Yeonpyeongdo island. In response to these incidents he introduced the “May 24 Measures,” a law which banned bilateral business cooperation. As a result, inter-Korean economic relations were almost frozen and political dialogue was suspended.

Park's inter-Korean cooperation proposal tries to combine elements from the Sunshine Policy and Lee's position. She aims to present an approach that is neither too antagonistic nor too conciliatory. The bottom line is a minimum level of trust between the states. In the campaign, she pledged to implement the economic provisions of the agreement signed at the second inter-Korean summit (October 2007) and to meet with Kim Jong-un (as an envoy to North Korea, she met with Kim Jong-il in 2002). Park underscored the conditionality of this approach and the necessity for

verification of steps taken by the North. She argues that provocation from North Korea should be condemned and a robust deterrence be maintained, while at the same time being ready for talks should Kim Jong-un demonstrate a genuine willingness to begin negotiations.

North Korea's third nuclear test, carried out during the transition period in the ROK, was the first challenge for Park's administration. She decried the test resolutely, then declared at her inauguration ceremony that North Korea presents a serious security challenge for the ROK and that Kim's regime should abandon its nuclear ambitions. But she also highlighted her willingness to launch a trust-building process on the Korean Peninsula, with a goal of harmonious unification—reaffirming her pledges from the campaign.

Alliance with the U.S. The cornerstone of South Korean foreign and security policy remains relations with the U.S.—Seoul's main ally. The alliance is founded on defence treaty signed in 1953 which, among others, serves to deter North Korea provocation, and sanctions the stationing of U.S. troops in the ROK. Under Lee's administration, bilateral relations were fortified (as, for example, in October 2012, when Washington approved enhancing the range of South Korean ballistic missiles). Nevertheless, closer cooperation is required (Park speaks of "upgrading the alliance"), taking into account the United States' doubts about Park's softer position towards the DPRK compared to President Barack Obama's preference for a tougher attitude to Kim's regime, and other pending issues, such as peaceful nuclear cooperation agreement.

President Park also advocates a deepening of China–U.S. relations which she does not perceive as a zero-sum game. Both states play a significant role in relations with the DPRK—the PRC is the North's closest ally, while the U.S. is the main enemy against which the North is developing its deterrent programme. In this context, Park argues that genuine U.S.–PRC cooperation may push Kim Jong-un to rethink its policy, for example by freezing its missile and nuclear programs. In her campaign, Park even hinted at trilateral Sino-American-South Korean talks.

Major Regional Partners. President Park also intends to enhance cooperation with ROK's neighbours—China and Japan. During Lee's presidency, cooperation with the PRC was strained. The main setbacks were ongoing tensions about illegal fishing in the Yellow Sea, China's repatriation of North Korea refugees (the PRC argues that these people are illegal economic migrants and often sends them back to the North), the territorial dispute over the leodo/Suyan reef in the East China Sea, and different views on the DPRK. President Park, however, wishes to boost relations with the PRC as an emerging power, a close ally of the DPRK, and the ROK's the largest trading partner.

Mending fences with Japan seems to be another element of Park's foreign policy. Korea–Japan relations became acrimonious after president Lee's first ever visit (August 2012) to the Dokdo/Takeshima islands, claimed by both ROK and Japan, and amid diplomatic friction over historical issues. Despite recent indications that Japan may wish to ease tensions, e.g. sending an envoy to Seoul to defuse territorial spats and Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso's participation in Park's inauguration ceremony, Tokyo decision on the official government presence at Takeshima Day, 22 February (an event promoting the islands as Japanese territory), generated public and diplomatic outrage in Korea.

Park also highlights the need to strengthen South Korea–China–Japan cooperation. Despite a trilateral mechanism established in 2008 (the first such meeting outside the ASEAN+3 formula), and the opening of the secretariat in 2011 in Seoul, cooperation has not been as fruitful as expected. The obstacles lie in territorial disputes and unresolved historical issues, which raise nationalist sentiments, an in deteriorating economic and political cooperation. Thus, Park proposes to start the rapprochement process by harnessing the potential and credentials of European reconciliation.

Conclusions and Recommendations. North Korea's nuclear posture, along with China's dual-track attitude towards it (condemning the nuclear programme but providing assistance to support Kim's regime and avert its collapse) make Park's idealistic confidence building policy more difficult than depicted in her campaign. After the DPRK's provocations and announcements of further nuclear developments, Park demonstrated a hard-line approach similar to Lee's. However, it is possible that, despite provocation aimed at demonstrating Kim Jong-un's power, the North may signal its will to resume dialogue. Then, President Park will be under pressure to hammer out a clear stance on Kim's regime and define boundary conditions for talks which may bring tangible outputs. Since Kim's regime is unpredictable, it is difficult to pursue a coherent policy towards the DPRK. It seems that Park will continue ROK's defence policy which, apart from the U.S. alliance, focuses mainly on its own deterrence and offensive system (e.g. cruise missile and ballistic missile systems, early warning, and taking wartime command control)—a similar approach to Poland's defence stance based on cooperation with the U.S. and Poland's own defence capabilities.

For the European Union, the ROK is an important economic partner. Cooperation has been strengthened since the signing of the EU-Korea free trade agreement (FTA), which was implemented in July 2011 and is the EU's first FTA with an Asian state. Nevertheless, it seems apparent that lingering security challenges in Asia could be an issue of concern for the EU. Park's efforts to ameliorate regional security concerns are in the EU's interest and should be given clear support, even if only verbally, by Brussels. The new president's foreign policy agenda, with its suggestion of using EU rapprochement "know-how" and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) model in contributing to peace and stability, are incentives for Europe to expand its visibility, confirm its peaceful image, secure its economic interests, and offer active support to confidence-building measures in Asia by sharing experience and lessons learnt. Poland, with its successful rapprochement with Germany, and as a supporter of the OSCE, the important security-oriented intergovernmental entity, should utilise these experiences as tangible assets in the pursuit of regional reconciliation efforts.