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**POLITICAL CHANGE AND TRANSITION IN NORTHEAST ASIA**

**Political Change and Transition in Northeast Asia: From a Korean  
Perspective**

by

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**STRATEGISING CHANGE IN ASIA :**

**Political Change and Transition in Northeast Asia: From a Korean Perspective**

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**1. Introduction**

Leadership change in 2012 in Korea was significantly meaningful in that not only did we see a first ever female president in Korean history coming into power but her victory was also accompanied by her party's winning the majority status in the National Assembly in April 2012 general election. Hence, Korea is expected to enjoy the benefits of the ruling party's majority status and therefore law makers' propensity to unite and cooperate in support of the new leader. Consequently President Park Geun-hye has enjoyed a rather high approval rate, reaching the apex (61.8%) on May 2, 2013. With a rather high support from the general public and law makers behind her, will she be able to realize the goal of "the era of people's happiness" in

the foreign policy realm also?

As declared in her address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the four tenets that “guide her government” are a revived economy, with a people that are happy, with a flourishing culture and on a pathway to a reunified peninsula. The efficacy of these tenets is premised upon the security environment and her foreign relations around Korea, in addition to domestic stability and socio-economic well-being. Korean people’s happiness, the motto of Park’s government, will hinge upon Korea’s economic development, that must overcome challenges from the conditions of foreign market, security predicament, and the choices it will have to make from the emerging multiple free trade arrangements. In the foreign policy realm, Park’s government are currently being challenged by the situation in North Korea, China’s surging international profile, the rise of nationalism in Japan, and merging pressure from a multiple discourse on free trade cooperation.

Against these challenges, President Park has already delivered some specific measures. On the relationship with North Korea, she wants to advance the so-called “Korean peninsula trust-building process. She also made it known that Korea would

have to thrive on a cooperative approach to the regional states including China and Japan. Trust-building with the neighboring states is a requisite to the success of the trust-building process with North Korea. Discourse on free trade in Korea is now favoring the original idea of an free trade agreement (FTA) among the three regional states, China, Japan, and Korea (CJK) over Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP).

## **II. How will President Park Manage Seoul's Relations with Pyongyang?**

President Park unfortunately inherited an inter-Korean relation at its worst possible state in history. Inter-Korean relation today is obviously at its nadir not only for North Korea's recent and successive provocations but also due to the long-lasting stalemate in dialogue since the shooting death of a Korean female tourist in summer 2008. Inter-Korean dialogue is at a long stalemate by lack of progress and not by its absence. Surprisingly enough, in the first three years before the sinking of Cheonan vessel, there were twenty-one inter-Korean dialogues held at both high and working levels. Since the sinking of Cheonan in March 2010, however, only six dialogues were held till the last day of the previous government (February 25, 2013); of the six,

two were for military talks and four were Red Cross contacts for humanitarian aid purposes. Significant reduction in the number of dialogue can also be attributed to the passing of Kim Jong Il in December 2011 and the ensuing hereditary succession transition process by his son, Kim Jung Un.

President Park, however, is committed to restoring the relationship with North Korea whereby the two Koreas can together advance peace and stability around the Korean peninsula and create a trust-building opportunity that has completely vanished. Her aspiration to reengage with Pyongyang is laid out in so-called the “Korean peninsula trust-building process.” The success of the trust-building process will, however, largely determined early and by Pyongyang’s willingness to fulfill one of the critical prerequisites, i.e. an apology on the aforementioned two incidents in addition to the shelling of Y onpyeong island in November 2010. It will be intellectually an immense challenge for Korean government to figure out ways for North Korea to accept this prerequisite, notwithstanding the difficulty of others also. These other prerequisites include the North to assume international responsibilities and norms bestowed on a member of international community as it deems itself,

commitment to fulfill the promises it has made over the years, and immediately halt all provocations.

In the heart of the trust-building process lie her deep concerns toward the well-being of the North Korean people, the opportunity for peace and shared development, and laying the groundwork for an era of harmonious unification. She urges North Korea to take this endeavor together and the very first step would be to drop its weapons, come out of isolation and demonstrate its willingness to honor the promises that it has already made in September 19 Joint Statement from one of the six-party talks. The initiative step does not constitute the requisite condition but rather the contents of the pre-process talks that will follow after the aforementioned prerequisites are fulfilled but before the actual talks for the trust-building process actually takes place.

President Park will try her utmost to look for a breakthrough for an opportunity for a dialogue with North Korea can merge, rise naturally, and fall through. For this end, she will seek ways to convey Korea's desire for talks with the North by all and any means. Along the course, Korea will seek cooperation and close consultation with

the neighboring states in an attempt to create an atmosphere conducive to inter-Korean dialogue. President Park's recently concluded visit to Washington was a clear reflection of such efforts and her upcoming visit to Beijing in June will most likely to follow a similar suit. The role of the neighboring states cannot be overlooked as it will serve as the basis of credible deterrence to build trust between the South and the North. They are the vital power to appeal the merits of dialogue to the North. The idea of dialogue can only be appealing to North Korea when the merits embodied in the idea can be secured by the neighboring states. That is, a new predicament created for dialogue can boost the North's sense of security with the merits embedded in engagement and help transform today's "extremely serious" security environment into a more harmonious, amicable, and cooperative one.

Given the security environment ripe and North Korea's acceptance for talks, we can expect President Park not to be too overtly concerned with the formality of apology but more susceptible to the nuance and the delivery channel of the apologetic message from Pyongyang. An apologetic message with a nuanced guilt and sincere condolence coming from the military or an authoritative government

channel at the initial phase of contacts will facilitate negotiation for the trust-building process. By seizing this opportunity the two Koreas can negotiate the agenda to be discussed for the process on the basis of step-by-step approach. With this scenario in mind, President Park will therefore try her utmost to best manipulate and utilize any opportunities conducive to the fruition of her grand design of the trust-building process. She will proactively pursue this end with persistent persuasion regardless of the circumstance.

### **III. Will Korea adopt a hard-line or cooperative approach in the triangular relations?**

Korea will adopt a cooperative approach in the triangular relations. It cannot afford to take a hard-line approach in either bilateral relations with China and Japan respectively or triangular relations with the two largely for security reasons. Korea is highly appreciative of China's growing constructive role and highly cognizant of Japan's importance in the winning cause of securing peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. Conversely, Korea also wants to be as cooperative as possible with China and Japan to further secure peace and stability of the Korean peninsula. Korea has substantiated its stance and desire by demonstrating its unwillingness in



taking sides with one against the other in its triangular relations, regardless of the circumstance.

Today, for instance, Korea and China confront the same Japan problem over territorial issues, history problems, and rising Japanese nationalism. On some occasions, and at the heat of the moment, it was true that Beijing had asked Seoul to contemplate on collaborated efforts in pressing Japan on these issues. Seoul however decided not to go with the idea on the grounds that the situation could only spiral into a negative direction. While Seoul shares Beijing's agony and frustration and opposes Tokyo's irrational obstinacy, it does not want the situation to go downward spiral by isolating one party against the other. It usually does not oppose the idea of concerted efforts as a means to solve regional or unjustly treated national issues, but it does on territorial disputes since they touch on the sovereign rights of involved parties.

Security cooperation must be highly sought, however, for the improvement in the security environment of the Korean peninsula. It is particularly the case with North Korea's nuclear challenge. In order to peacefully solve the North Korean situation,

both nuclear issue and bringing it out of isolation, cooperation with other concerned parties is a must. A seemingly monumental task as such cannot be realized by an individual effort. Security cooperation is an integral part to multilateral efforts (e.g. the six-party talks), and policy coordination within such cooperative security framework must be integrated into the individual's approach to North Korea so as to avoid unnecessary miscommunication, misunderstanding and resultant misinterpretation of intentions and purposes. A healthy policy coordination is predicated upon good communication among the concerned parties and therefore cooperative relations are highly prioritized by the Korean government.

Furthermore, Korea will assume a cooperative stance with China and Japan on the economic front also. One of the high priorities on Korea's foreign policy agenda is to further advance regional integration and cooperation in non-security areas including economics, trade, environment, and others alike. Korea conceives one of the most integral parts for sustainable development lies in the regional integration process based on cooperation and multilateralism. Sustainable development, just like in securing peace and stability efforts, must be predicated upon cooperation. A

state cannot realize it independently and without cooperating with others. Hence, for a state like Korea, whose economy is heavily depend on trade and external economic conditions, maintaining a cooperative relations with the neighboring states is a requisite condition to its sustainable development aspiration.

#### **IV. What are the prospects for the China-Japan-Korea (CJK) trilateral trade cooperation?**

Korea once had high expectations on the prospects for CJK trilateral trade cooperation until surging nationalism in Japan in recent times. Despite the first ministerial trilateral trade talks held in March in Seoul, the trilateral summit that had been originally scheduled in May in Seoul was postponed indefinitely at China's request for this political reason. In the midst of surging nationalism in Japan, some new developments associated with regional free trade arrangements are now emerging, thereby making the already-complicated CJK free trade agreement a much harder to pursue. These newly emerging ideas are multiple in numbers varies in character and actively being promoted by the regional powers. All regional states, whether involved or not, have to contemplate all the implications and ramifications of these new ideas from their own strategic perspective.

As of now, the prospects for CJK free trade agreement (FTA) are now being overshadowed and undermined by those of TPP and RCEP. TPP is being actively pursued by the US, and Japan has recently joined the negotiation process. China seems to find an alternative to CJK FTA in the RCEP as it is contemplating the thoughts on the possibility of realizing the former arrangement in realistic terms as it concludes the CJK FTA is seriously obstructed by Japan's erratic external behavior over extant bilateral issues as well as multilaterally involved issues like free trade arrangements. There is a growing consensus that China may be better off with the RCEP than CJK arrangement on the grounds that the latter is becoming more unrealistic by nature and less favorable in economic sense.

On the contrary, South Korea is still a persistent advocate of CJK FTA for multifaceted reasons. From an economic strategic point of view TPP's exclusion of China may isolate China which is not accommodating to the region's complementary economic structure. On the contrary, Japan's isolationist stance on CJK will only prompt the conclusion of Korea-China FTA. From a security strategic perspective, regional integration in Northeast Asia based on CJK FTA is expected to engender a

spill-over effect into the security and diplomatic realm. It can function as a venue for an improvement in China-Japan relations and enhance peace and stability of the Korean peninsula. From a selfcentric perspective, Korea will be the greatest beneficiary of CJK FTA. TPP in particular is not too appealing to Korea's interest largely because Korea already has concluded, or is currently in pursuit of, FTA's with a substantial number of the potential TPP member states. In light of President Park's policy orientation on FTA, Korea has confirmed its commitment to CJK FTA recently and declared some specific measures for its incremental approaches to realize this end. At the current state of China-Japan relation, for instance, Park's government last April has expressed its commitment to realizing Korea-China FTA and hoped it would pave the way for the conclusion of CJK FTA

## **V. Concluding Remarks**

Impact of political leadership change in Korea will be as extensive on the region as it will domestically. Domestically President Park's rise to the power will entail a fundamental change in Korean society as Park's government is geared towards

creating a fair, equal, and happy society, in which innovation and creative thinking will be the basis of such endeavor. On the diplomatic front, Park's government will strive hard to creating a security environment conducive to trust-building. It will persistently and actively pursue to create opportunities for dialogue with all the regional players including North Korea. It will not await opportunities for dialogue to come forward; instead it will proactively seek to build such opportunities even in times of difficulty. President Park seems to be ready to embark on this diplomatic excursion with her already announced plan for "Korean peninsula trust-building process," "Korea-China-US dialogue," and "Seoul process" for multilateral regional security cooperation.

All her planned multilateral approaches are in great demand of cooperation from all regional players including North Korea. For this end, President Park is committed to engaging with all players on equal basis, equal opportunity, and equal respect. She will be a persistent pursuer for multilateral cooperation in both economic and security realm as she aspires for building a foundation for Korea's unification. This aspiration will entail substantial changes in the dynamics of international relations in

the region. President Park will most likely take the initiative in bringing the regional players together. Although her approaches are not specifically defined as of today, she will try to garner support from all angles of the regional dynamics to realize this end.

Indeed, her diplomatic endeavor may be intellectually challenging and provocative. It is an occasion like today we must think and work together on how to break the ground so that the dynamics of the region can surge to the next level and pave the way for sustainable peace and development of the region. Notwithstanding the value of others' constructive initiatives, Korea has put forward a number of regional multilateral frameworks with hopes to create an "era of people's happiness" and will proactively seek for close consultation and cooperation. As much as we value the importance of dialogue and peaceful solution to regional issues, the regional players should not restrain their support and participation for political reasons. We must be political and strategic in our creative and innovative thinking but not in pursuit of self-serving causes.