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South Korea's Foreign Policy in 2013: Building Trust in East Asia

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SARAH TEO, FEB 6 2014

"Trust" has been the buzzword for South Korean President Park Geun-hye and her administration. Even before taking office in February 2013, President Park had outlined the key tenets of her proposed trust-building strategies for improving and stabilising relations with North Korea, China and Japan. Essentially, the trustpolitik strategy comprises three layers. First, Seoul's trust-building with Pyongyang is aimed at dissuading the latter from the pursuit of nuclear capability, and ultimately to promote peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. Second, President Park has also proposed a Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NEAPCI), to forge mutual trust and boost cooperation among China, Japan and South Korea. Finally, South Korea is also enhancing its relations with countries beyond its immediate backyard, including the member states of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), India and Europe.

A year since President Park and her administration have actualised trustpolitik, South Korea has strengthened its alliance with the United States, improved relations with China, as well as reinforced ties with ASEAN and its member countries. Trust-building initiatives with North Korea, however, have not seemed to visibly change the situation on the Korean peninsula so far. Relations with Japan also remain frosty. These differing trajectories indicate that the success of trustpolitik is very much dependent on the interests that are perceived to be at stake in both South Korea and its neighbouring countries.

No Change in Inter-Korean Relations

The Park administration took office amid escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula. North Korea conducted its third nuclear test in February, U.S. B-2 stealth bombers were deployed for the first time in a joint military drill with South Korea in March, inter-Korean hotlines were suspended and operations at the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) came to a temporary halt in April.

Despite the instability arising from these developments, the Seoul government never wavered from its "alignment policy," which calls for both strengthening deterrence against Pyongyang as well as remaining open to engagement. Indeed, even as South Korea responded forcefully to North Korea's provocations, it continued providing humanitarian assistance to North Korea and reiterating its openness to dialogue.

Some analysts have attributed the reopening of the KIC to President Park's trustpolitik strategy. Furthermore, despite the intensifying rhetoric, the absence of provocations over the past year on the scale of the sinking of the *Cheonan* or shelling of Yeonpyeongdo suggests that the dual-track approach of trustpolitik may have worked. While this is a reasonable assessment, it should also be noted that overall, nothing has really changed. North Korea remains adamant in its pursuit of nuclear capability. The threat level on the Korean peninsula also continues to depend on the decisions (perhaps more often than not aimed at addressing domestic issues) of the unpredictable Pyongyang leadership, making the success of trustpolitik difficult to measure. Nevertheless, the carrot-and-stick approach seems more likely to help than hurt inter-Korean relations, and a consistent application of the strategy may in the longer term help to stabilise bilateral ties even if North Korea does not give up its pursuit of nuclear capability.

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Improving Relations with China (but Ties with Japan Remain Frosty)

President Park has also adopted a trust-based approach to relations with China and Japan. The NEAPCI aims to address "Asia's paradox," referring to the growing economic interdependence among China, Japan and South Korea on the one hand and languishing political-security cooperation on the other. President Park proposes cooperation on "softer issues" first, such as environmental issues, nuclear safety and disaster relief. Once trust has been established through these issues, cooperation could then expand to address the tougher issues.

At the trilateral level, dialogue and cooperation on issues such as the environment, culture, nuclear safety and cyber security have occurred over the past year, even as political relations deteriorated. Talks on the China-ROK-Japan Free Trade Agreement were also kick-started. These herald positive developments for close regional cooperation and thus the NEAPCI.

At the bilateral level, however, the state of South Korea's relations with China and Japan could not be more different. Ties with China have improved markedly from the strains under the previous Lee Myung-bak administration. In June, President Park visited Beijing, her second overseas trip after visiting the United States earlier in May. The decision to travel to China before going to Japan broke with precedence, reflecting not only China's economic importance to South Korea but also the diverging trends in Seoul's respective bilateral ties with Beijing and Tokyo.

The ROK-China Summit was a high point in bilateral relations, as both leaders displayed their strong personal rapport and pledged to expand cooperation in all sectors. China expressed support for Seoul's trust-building approach to North Korea and Northeast Asia, and both sides agreed on the goal of a denuclearised Korean peninsula. The progressing ties were marred, only slightly, by China and subsequently South Korea announcing the expansion of their respective air defence identification zones at the end of the year. Even then, the responses from each side were relatively restrained, and the inaugural bilateral Foreign Policy and Security Dialogue was held at the end of December to reaffirm common interests and cooperation. These developments suggest that Seoul and Beijing are committed to moving forward on bilateral ties, indicating a positive outlook for ROK-China relations in the coming year.

Unlike South Korea-China ties, South Korea's relations with Japan remained frosty in 2013 due to historical and maritime territorial disputes. Tokyo's unilateral decision to send an envoy to Pyongyang in May, without prior notice to Seoul, further soured relations as the latter had been trying to coordinate the responses of the international community to the North Korean issue. These incidents account for the lack of an official ROK-Japan Summit since the leadership transition in both countries, and have also resulted in the suspension of several senior-level and working-level exchanges. With South Korea-Japan relations at an all-time low, President Park's NEAPCI appears to have hit a snag.

There are two possible reasons why trustpolitik has not improved South Korea's relations with Japan thus far. First, the unhappiness caused by historical issues and maritime territorial disputes (which also stem from history) are deep-seated and have deepened each time a perceived "provocative" act occurs. Without resolving, or at least addressing the root of these problems, there is no stable foundation upon which trust can be built. Second, domestic sentiment could have driven the leaders of both countries to adopt foreign policy decisions that have resulted in the current stalemate in bilateral relations. For example, a poll by the Asan Institute last year found that 85 percent of South Koreans did not trust Japan and 76.5 percent were unfavourable towards Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Such public opinion could have led South Korean officials to adopt a firm stance against Prime Minister Abe's recent actions and comments.

Strengthening Ties with ASEAN

Beyond Northeast Asia, President Park has also displayed her commitment to enhancing relations and cooperation with Southeast Asia and ASEAN, adopting a strategy similar to her predecessor Lee Myung-bak's New Asia Initiative. Apart from the regular ASEAN meetings, bilateral summits were held with Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei and Singapore, in which the leaders pledged to enhance relations in all aspects. Notably, President

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Park managed to secure support, at least rhetorically, for her trustpolitik approach to North Korea from the Southeast Asian countries.

At the ASEAN Summit in Brunei last October, South Korea and ASEAN also agreed to launch a security dialogue, with the inaugural meeting to be held this year involving the vice-foreign ministers. The agenda for the dialogue would include North Korea and other regional security issues, indicating that Seoul is hoping to garner stronger support for its North Korean policy. Multilateralism is an essential diplomatic tool for middle powers such as South Korea, as they are better able to influence regional and global developments as a group. In this regard, South Korea is likely to view ASEAN as a fellow East Asian middle power that can help to stabilise the region amid the changing power dynamics.

Prospects for Trustpolitik in 2014

The past year has seen some hits and misses in President Park's trustpolitik approach to South Korea's foreign relations in East Asia. While China and ASEAN have expressed support for President Park's initiatives, Japan and North Korea seem less amenable to Seoul's trust-based strategy.

Three key issues in 2014 are worth watching to assess the development of trustpolitik in East Asia. First, North Korea's execution of Jang Sung-taek last December has led to speculation about Pyongyang's relations with Beijing and the policy priorities of leader Kim Jong-un. Whether North Korea turns even more hard-line or is open to some sort of reform will impact its receptiveness to trustpolitik initiatives. An upcoming gauge of North Korea's policy towards the South for 2014 would be the annual South Korea-U.S. military drills scheduled for February. As this year's exercise will be toned down from last year's display of military might, North Korea's response may be somewhat indicative of whether the trustpolitik approach employed thus far has influenced its attitude toward South Korea.

Second, the dynamics in Northeast Asia will also affect President Park's trust-building initiatives. Seoul's relations with Beijing and Washington look set to further strengthen, while ties with Japan are likely to remain marred, at least for the short-term, by historical and maritime territorial disputes. As South Korea and Japan share several strategic interests, there will be opportunities to improve bilateral relations if both countries choose to focus on cooperation. Playing up the disputes for domestic political purposes would not bode well for interstate trust-building. For the NEAPCI to make progress in diminishing "Asia's paradox," it is essential for all parties to first make efforts towards improving the respective sets of bilateral relations.

Finally, this year marks the 25th anniversary of ASEAN-Korea dialogue relations and South Korea has announced plans to host a Commemorative Summit to celebrate this occasion. While the ASEAN countries may not be as strategically important compared to China and Japan for South Korea, Seoul recognises the rising influence of ASEAN in regional and international affairs. Enhancing relations with ASEAN could also help in trust-building with North Korea, as all 10 ASEAN countries have established diplomatic relations with Pyongyang, and the latter is a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum. As such, notwithstanding its challenges in Northeast Asia, South Korea is likely to also work on boosting ties with ASEAN in this milestone year.

About the author:

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