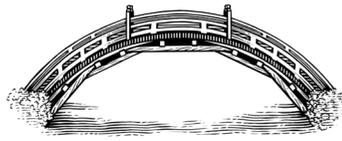


ROUNDTABLE

Northeast Asia's New Leaders and the Challenges Ahead



Travis Tanner

Yoichiro Sato

Ren Xiao

Sung-Yoon Lee

Introduction

Travis Tanner

All major Northeast Asian countries, as well as the United States, held elections or underwent leadership transitions in 2012 that will not only have an impact on their respective domestic political landscapes but also shape their foreign policy priorities in 2013 and beyond. For the Asia-Pacific as a whole, the leadership transitions of 2012 will have profound geopolitical consequences for years to come.

In the United States, the re-election of President Barack Obama in November indicates that the U.S. policy of strategic rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific will be largely sustained, despite budgetary pressures and domestic political challenges. In China, the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party convened in November and made a once-a-decade announcement of a new cohort of national leaders, with Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang being named to the highest positions on the Politburo Standing Committee. Likewise, both Japan and South Korea held major elections in December. Japan returned Shinzo Abe and the previously dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to power following a few short years of rule by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), while in South Korea, Park Guen-hye of the Saenuri Party was elected president, becoming the first woman democratically chosen to lead a Northeast Asian state.

Earlier in 2012, Taiwan and Russia both held national elections. In Taiwan, incumbent president Ma Ying-jeou of the Kuomintang (KMT) was re-elected in January, likely indicating his rapprochement with mainland China will continue. In Russia, a controversial election in March returned the presidency to Vladimir Putin, despite large protests in Moscow similar to those following the December 2011 legislative elections. Finally, in the wake of Kim Jong-un's formal assumption of power in late 2011, North Korean politics continued to unfold during 2012 in ways little understood by the outside world.

Recognizing that all these leadership changes were occurring within a relatively short window, the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), in partnership with the Henry M. Jackson Foundation and the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington, hosted an international conference on "Northeast Asia in Transition:

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New Leadership, New Dynamics.” The conference, which was held on November 13, 2012, at the University of Washington, featured a select group of experts who examined the political, economic, and social issues affecting Northeast Asia amid these leadership transitions.

The conference was organized by NBR’s Kenneth B. and Anne H.H. Pyle Center for Northeast Asian Studies. Named in honor of NBR’s founding president and his wife, the Pyle Center conducts research and organizes events on Northeast Asia to advance the study of the complex dynamics and deep forces reshaping the region. The conference was also part of a series of events organized to celebrate the Henry M. Jackson centennial, the hundredth anniversary of Senator Jackson’s birth.

This roundtable features essays by three of the presenters, who were asked to examine the leadership transitions in Japan, China, and the Korean Peninsula and the associated implications for Northeast Asia. Yoichiro Sato (Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University) examines the shifting domestic political landscape that led to the LDP’s return to power and how the new Abe government will likely address the challenges currently facing Japan. He notes that the new government is likely to adopt a more nationalistic stance, which could lead to escalating regional tensions and difficulties in managing the alliance with the United States. Ren Xiao (Fudan University) provides a lucid rundown of the outcomes of the 18th Party Congress and describes the implications of the new leadership configuration for China’s relations with Japan, South Korea, and the United States. He warns leaders in China and the United States not to exaggerate each other’s “unfriendly intentions” and recommends that both new governments explore areas for collaboration that will promote peace and benefit both nations. Sung-yoon Lee (Tufts University) gives an authoritative and insightful assessment of the “uniquely unique” North Korean leadership structure, pointing out its many flaws and weaknesses. He argues that Kim Jong-un’s youth and inexperience make the regime vulnerable and that President Obama and President Park Geun-hye should take advantage of this opportunity to build a robust and credible threat capable of deterring future provocations from Pyongyang.

I would like to express deep appreciation to the Henry M. Jackson Foundation and the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies for their wonderful partnership on this project and in particular for the financial support that made the conference possible. I also wish to thank the Consulate General of Japan in Seattle, the Ford Foundation, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan)

for supporting the participation of several of the international speakers. Finally, I would like to recognize and thank Professor Pyle for his continued intellectual leadership, astute programmatic guidance, and active participation in the conference. ◆

Leadership Changes and Japan in 2012–13

Yoichiro Sato

The December 16, 2012, election for the lower house of parliament in Japan gave a decisive victory to the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) over the incumbent ruling party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). While the LDP returns to power under the leadership of former prime minister Shinzo Abe, DPJ conservatives, including former prime minister Yoshihiko Noda, are consolidating their grip on the party after its ejection from power and electoral defeat. The LDP cooperated with Noda on tax reform in exchange for an early election, and Noda responded by forcing out those DPJ politicians who opposed the tax reform and calling a snap election.

The LDP won a comfortable majority in the lower house but not the two-thirds majority required for constitutional amendments. Abe's electoral pledge to amend the constitution was echoed by the conservative Japan Restoration Party (JRP), formed by the highly popular conservative governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, and the equally popular mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto. The prospect of an LDP-JRP coalition invited an overrated fear of Japanese nationalism overseas. Instead, the LDP picked its long-term ally Komeito as its coalition partner, giving the coalition a combined strength of 325 seats—more than two-thirds of the total 480 lower house seats. However, the centrist Komeito will not lend its strength to Abe's constitutional redesign. As the LDP-Komeito coalition lacks a majority in the upper house, the two-thirds majority in the lower house will be used instead to override unwanted upper house decisions. This use will be instrumental when controversial security policy decisions (such as dispatching troops overseas under sunset legislation) must be voted on.

For now, the LDP-Komeito coalition that excludes Ishihara and Hashimoto's right-leaning grouping will keep security policy at the present level of minimally required defensive assertiveness. The result of the next election in the upper house, due in summer 2013, and the composition of a possible two-thirds majority there will be the key to whether conservatives can fully pursue their more assertive security policy.

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Issues in U.S.-Japan Relations for Obama's Second Term

At the beginning of President Barack Obama's second term, U.S.-Japan relations face multiple challenges. On a positive note, Obama's announcement of the U.S. "pivot" or "rebalancing" toward Asia is welcomed by Japan, which felt a sense of neglect due to U.S. preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan. U.S. attention, however, does not by itself guarantee positive results. North Korea for the most part continued to refuse to participate in discussions through Obama's first term, and even a revived trilateral consultation between the United States, Japan, and South Korea could not find an effective solution to the problem. U.S. attention to East Asia in regard to China's increasing maritime assertiveness is viewed by Japan as, at best, reactive and insufficient. The bilateral discord over the relocation of the Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station in Okinawa, triggered by DPJ prime minister Yukio Hatoyama's decision to revisit the previous agreement, presents a significant challenge. The new government finds itself caught between the demand for U.S. presence that is brought on by rising regional tension and the heightened expectations of Okinawans that the United States' presence on the island will be reduced.

Obama's re-election has ensured that his government will continue its commitment to repairing the damage to U.S.-Japan relations caused by the Futenma saga. Despite the election of a new Japanese government, the alliance is expected to continue on the current course of repair, given rising regional tension and Japan's lack of an alternative security guarantee. Okinawa remains a wild-card issue, however, as the possibility of low-ranking military personnel causing an incident of strategic significance never ceases to trouble the decision-makers of the two countries.

The first Obama administration also coincided with a period of escalating tension between China and its neighbors. U.S. interests in trading with and selling treasury bonds to China have moderated the otherwise increasing geopolitical rivalry between the two countries. The efforts of many Asian countries to court U.S. support in their ongoing disputes vis-à-vis China have only achieved limited success, given that the United States has attempted to diplomatically engage China and has refrained from being overly critical of its behavior. For Japan, Washington's perceived neutrality on regional disputes in East Asia hurts the credibility of the United States as an ally. Although the United States fears unwanted entrapment in the regional conflicts of its Asian allies, those same allies are carefully watching whether verbal U.S. commitments to regional stability through strategic

rebalancing toward Asia are backed by tangible commitments through troop deployments and operational doctrines.

For Japan, the foremost test in Obama's second term will be how the United States responds to China's ongoing challenge to Japanese control of the Senkaku Islands (called the Diaoyu Islands by China). If Tokyo's posture on this issue under Noda—nationalization of one of the islands in the Senkaku group in a defensive response to numerous landing attempts by Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese right-wing activists—was problematic for Washington, Obama should anticipate additional trouble if the new Abe government tries to station police officers on the now nationalized island. Overall, Japanese policymakers hope that Obama will endorse a solution to the territorial dispute based on international law and commit the United States to preventing China from attempting to alter the status quo of Japanese control through any other means, including ongoing violations of territorial waters around the islands by Chinese government vessels.

Finally, some in Japan are wary that Obama will attempt to leave his mark on Asia without being sensitive to Japan's preferences. After prime minister Junichiro Koizumi skillfully led the country toward closer security cooperation with the United States, the final two years of the George W. Bush administration brought a sense of discomfort to Japan. The desire to leave a foreign policy legacy lured Bush into a gambit to bilaterally negotiate with North Korea after it conducted its first nuclear weapons test on October 9, 2006. When the United States removed North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, Japan, which had just increased its financial sanctions against North Korea, felt betrayed by the perceived de-linking of the abduction of Japanese citizens and U.S. sanctions. In the end, the North Korean concession of destroying a cooling water tower at the Yongbyon nuclear facility in exchange for U.S. aid was not much more than an expensive piece of subsidized propaganda for both Bush and North Korea. Many Japanese hope that Obama in his second term will not repeat Bush's mistake.

China's Leadership Transition

As the deceleration of the world economy seems to have put a notable dent on China's growth rate in 2012, social instability within China and the government's willingness to let off public steam through controlled anti-Japanese demonstrations are major sources of concern for Japan. Anti-Japanese nationalism in China has been employed on other occasions

to block Japanese foreign policy initiatives, including Japan's candidacy to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Noda's decision to nationalize one of the islands in the Senkaku group, despite Chinese opposition and orchestrated protests, indicates that Japan's effort to end its postwar pattern of "apology diplomacy" has moved out of the symbolic mode—for example, Koizumi's yearly visits to the Yasukuni Shrine—and entered the domain of more tangible policies. Although the recent leadership competition in China to some extent exacerbated anti-Japanese nationalism, Japan is not yet lowering its guard, given that the activities of Chinese ships around the Senkaku Islands do not seem to have declined even after the Party Congress.

The intra-party competition leading to the fall 2012 leadership transition was so intense that even overseas nonexpert observers of Chinese politics could appreciate the drama. Though moderates within the Communist Party, as represented by Xi Jinping, have won the leadership competition, growing attention to security, with a strong focus on the maritime domain, is evident in China's foreign policy. Since Deng Xiaoping's reign, Tokyo's typical diplomacy toward China has relied on dealing with pro-development moderates and depending on them to subdue anti-Japanese nationalism. But having seen Beijing's determined efforts to dampen Japan as a security and diplomatic actor, use of the "history card," expansive continental shelf claim in the East China Sea, and bullying of Southeast Asian countries over the South China Sea dispute, Japanese leaders are convinced that the concept of "peaceful rise" is nothing more than a propaganda ploy. China's careful use of armed civilian law-enforcement personnel and ships in most maritime confrontations suggests that the civilian leadership is fully in control of efforts to test the United States' willingness to commit itself to regional security. Such aggressive maritime behavior, if continued, is likely to provoke a harsher Japanese reaction.

Japan and the South Korean Presidential Election

Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) will likely continue their current path of slow and incremental improvement. President Lee Myung-bak's landing on the disputed Takeshima/Dokdo Island last summer invited a strong diplomatic protest and subtle yet tangible economic sanctions from Japan in the form of reduced availability of emergency credit. Japan's resolution to hold steady with its claim to Takeshima contrasted with Lee's failure to sustain the

temporary boost in his popularity following the landing. Subsequently, Japan largely wrote off Lee as a lame-duck president and waited for the December presidential election.

The victory of Park Geun-hye has brought a small hope that Japan will be able to re-engage South Korea in cooperation. The Japanese hope is derived from two lines of reasoning. First, Park was the ruling party's candidate, and Japan wishes to reset Japan-Korea relations to the beginning of the Lee administration when trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK cooperation over North Korean provocations showed signs of advancement. Second, the new president is the daughter of late president Park Chung-hee, who set the course of postwar reconciliation with Japan. Whether Park can be satisfied with active Korean control of Takeshima/Dokdo Island through the physical presence of armed police members at its installation—the current status quo—depends not on Japan's actions but on the power balance between Korean political parties. A weak executive party lacking a majority in the National Assembly might be more tempted to play the anti-Japanese card as many past South Korean leaders have done.

Although Japan maintains its strong claim to Korea-occupied Takeshima, Tokyo sees a long-term prospect for cooperation with Seoul and is patiently waiting for an opportunity to upgrade security discussions. Japan is keen to sign a defense cooperation agreement with South Korea and would likely make proactive moves if Park's leadership seems strong enough to deliver a positive outcome. After experiencing frustrations with the Lee administration, however, the new Japanese government may have difficulty jump-starting talks with the new Korean leadership.

The Succession of Kim Jong-un in North Korea

The current vacuum in cooperation between Japan and South Korea has provided an opportunity for North Korea to approach Japan. The preparation for a high-level talk on the normalization of bilateral relations, although currently suspended due to the North Korean ballistic missile test in December 2012, is not only a reflection of Japan's continuing attachment to resolving the abduction issue but also a hedge against the incoming South Korean leadership taking advantage of anti-Japanese sentiments.

North Korea's collective leadership appears to be undergoing a difficult consolidation of power around the symbolic proxy leadership of Kim Jong-un. It is still premature to say whether the regime can negotiate anything that it can actually deliver. The LDP under Abe, on the other hand, has a

long-awaited strength to sell international agreements to its domestic constituents. Yet the ability of Japan and North Korea to make a significant breakthrough toward diplomatic normalization will also heavily depend on Obama's policy toward North Korea during his second term and the new South Korean leadership's approach to North Korea. Because these three variables interact in a complex manner, it is impossible to predict the course of bilateral relations between Japan and North Korea.

Conclusion

Although leadership changes in Northeast Asia matter for Japan's security relations, their significance varies. Obama's re-election likely assures continuity in Japan's regional stance and security relations with the United States. Japan's two major parties have sufficiently narrowed their differences over security policy during the past three years, and both view a solid alliance with the United States as a source of diplomatic power in the increasingly turbulent Asia-Pacific. Therefore, alliance management is expected to continue on the current path of repair. In Japanese minds, the leadership transitions in China and South Korea raise the question of how the new governments might handle anti-Japanese nationalism. In South Korea, the playing up of anti-Japan nationalism by two recent presidents—one liberal and one conservative—disillusioned the Japanese to the point that they simply want to start a new relationship with the incoming Korean government with no expectations. With China, the election of pro-development moderate Xi Jinping as the Communist Party leader did not make Japan feel any less threatened by China. Nothing short of tangible concessions on the maritime dispute in the East China Sea will likely improve Japanese perceptions of China and its leadership. Uncertainty about the consolidation of the North Korean leadership adds to Japan's ambivalence in its approach to the new Kim regime.

Despite the LDP's control of a solid majority in the lower house of parliament, smaller parties continue to influence the country's security policy direction. The inclusion of the centrist Komeito in the ruling coalition balances the more assertive conservative elements within the LDP. Exclusion of the JRP has the same effect of keeping the LDP closer to the center. The election of an LDP led by Abe but not aligned with the JRP was the product of a perceived lack of a U.S. commitment to Japanese security and a sense of vulnerability in a turbulent Asia. At the same time, voters collectively showed their preference for a security policy that is solidly based

on the bilateral U.S.-Japan alliance over a more autonomous one by not giving a casting role to the JRP. In this sense, the alleged rise of right-wing nationalism in Japan, which would escalate tensions with Asian countries and make alliance management with the United States more challenging, is highly overrated. 

China's Leadership Change and Its Implications for Foreign Relations

Ren Xiao

China, together with other countries, made fall 2012 a high-profile international political season. Right after the U.S. presidential and congressional elections, the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took place on November 8–14. In line with the CCP's charter, the congress elected the new 205-person Central Committee, and the Central Committee elected the new 25-person Politburo and its 7-member Standing Committee, although the members of the Politburo and the Standing Committee had in fact been agreed on beforehand. The new standing committee members are Xi Jinping (born in 1953), Li Keqiang (born in 1955), Zhang Dejiang (born in 1946), Yu Zhengsheng (born in 1945), Liu Yunshan (born in 1947), Wang Qishan (born in 1948), and Zhang Gaoli (born in 1946). They constitute China's new top leadership and will lead the country into the next decade, with presumably only minor changes in 2017 when the next party congress is held. This is a significant political development for the country and, given that China is a rising great power, for the world as well.

Under the Chinese system, the Politburo Standing Committee is the highest echelon of leadership. Its members, ranging in number from five to nine, hold the most important leadership positions such as president, premier, chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee, and chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee. According to the new lineup, Xi Jinping will succeed Hu Jintao and become China's new president in spring 2013 during the National People's Congress (China's parliament), while Li Keqiang, who is in line to take over as premier, will succeed Wen Jiabao to become China's new head of government.

For China, the significance of another orderly transition of power to a new group of leaders cannot be overestimated, given the once unpredictable, irregular, capricious practices during the Mao period. No doubt, this represents political progress and an embodiment of political institutionalization, as well as a consolidation of constitutional authority.

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According to China's 1982 constitution, holders of these key leadership positions serve for a five-year term with a maximum of two terms (i.e., ten years). The top leader, who is China's president, general secretary of the CCP, and chairman of the Central Military Committee concurrently, is required to step down as president after ten years in office, if not in just five years, and thus change must occur once a decade. Also, the practice of collective leadership has been firmly established, which prevents excessive concentration of political power in just one or two individuals. As a result, China's domestic and foreign policies have become more predictable. This makes it possible for the government to implement long-term strategies, as it has done over the past 30-plus years—one of the secrets of China's economic success.

There are two levels on which to look at leadership change and its dynamics. One is the institutional level, at which people operate within certain frameworks. Although institutional reform is possible, it often happens in an incremental way. The other is the personal level. At this level, leaders have discretion and can leave their own imprints during their tenure. Deng Xiaoping, for example, played a monumental role in the transformation of China, while leaders after him inevitably have changed from playing a revolutionary role to playing a more evolutionary one. However, vision and judgment still matter greatly for the country. That is why the experience and style of leaders are weighted considerably.

With political transition and leadership turnover, there come both changes and continuities. In China's case, I would argue that there will be more continuities than changes. Why? Preparatory work for the recent political transition had already begun five years ago at the 17th Party Congress, when Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang joined the then nine-member Politburo Standing Committee. Over the last five years, Xi was Hu Jintao's heir apparent and de facto deputy, and Li in turn was Wen Jiabao's de facto deputy. Working at the top level, Xi and Li accumulated experience in domestic and foreign policymaking that has better prepared them for top leadership posts.

China's Relations with Japan and South Korea

Relations with Japan have entered a difficult phase. In this context, it is hard to imagine that the new Chinese leadership will adopt a different policy toward the two countries' dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, especially given provocations from the Japanese side. Before the recent crisis broke out, China had not taken any action regarding the

islands. Reportedly, China's strong reactions to the Japanese government's "purchasing" or "nationalizing" the islands surprised Japan. To Beijing, this reveals a lack of political sensitivity and a huge miscalculation by the Japanese leadership. In addition to the sovereignty issue, China's reactions have also arisen from popular sentiments and public opinion. When ordinary Chinese people with strong views on the Diaoyu issue are angry, no leader dares to be seen as "soft" toward Japan. After all, Japan has poorly handled the history issue and is still ambiguous about the atrocities it committed against neighboring countries, particularly China and Korea. Largely because it is more constrained by public opinion than past governments were, China's new leadership has little room to make concessions on the Diaoyu issue. Around the world, leaders are increasingly constrained by popular demands. They cannot just ignore the voices of their people, expressed through mass media and especially social media today, but prefer to better follow or respect those voices.

According to the agreement between the two governments, the Chinese and Japanese prime ministers pay a visit to each other's capital every other year, and it was the Chinese premier's turn to visit Japan in 2012. However, the visit was not arranged this year, despite both sides participating in several recent multilateral forums, such as the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) held in Laos and the East Asian leaders meetings in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, both in November. For Beijing, perceived provocations from Japan dampened the atmosphere for celebrating the 40th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two Asian giants.

Not surprisingly, China's leaders lost their appetite to work with the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government and waited to see what would happen in Japan's election. As was expected, in the general election held on December 16 the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) won a landslide victory and Shinzo Abe became prime minister again. Over six years ago, in September 2006, soon after he had become Japan's prime minister, Abe made an ice-breaking trip to Beijing and Seoul and thus rescued Japan's relations with China and Korea. It will be interesting to watch whether Abe will show similar leadership during his new term. His recent statements and visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, where the fourteen Class-A war criminals are enshrined, seem uncompromising and discouraging, and therefore worrisome. Although Abe has a reputation for being a pragmatist, it is difficult to tell just how pragmatic he will be, especially in terms of Japan's relations with China.

Recent developments seem to have had limited political impact on the process of trilateral cooperation between China, Japan, and South Korea. On November 20, their economic ministers held a meeting during the East Asia Summit and announced that the three countries would formally start free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations in early 2013. This is a significant step forward, building on the investment agreement that was concluded earlier. In the meantime, the China-South Korea FTA negotiations, which are already underway, will likely gain momentum and bear fruit sooner rather than later. Nonetheless, how long the current tension in the Sino-Japanese relationship lasts will have an impact on the next trilateral leaders' meeting, supposedly to be held in May 2013, and whether concrete cooperation projects will be adopted or advanced. Political instability in Japan has considerably weakened its capacity to make decisions and has more or less hindered its possible involvement in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the China-Japan-Korea trilateral.

China-U.S. Relations

Will China's leadership change have a major impact on relations with the United States? Probably not. Overall, Beijing wants a smooth transition to President Obama's second term, while Washington continues to be wary of China's rise and wants to make sure it does not affect the United States' global predominance. The relationship thus remains a complex one. On the one hand, the two nations continue to become more interdependent. On the other hand, strategically there is still distrust and mutual suspicion of each other's long-term intentions. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, the Obama administration has been carrying out a strategy of "rebalancing" toward the Asia-Pacific region, which has aggravated skepticism about U.S. intentions in China. While arguing that the U.S. rebalancing effort is aiming to contain China would be too simplistic, it would be equally hard to argue that this is not a stance against China. The strategic distrust is seemingly growing, which is a worrisome trend.

In the eyes of Washington, Beijing's influence in Asia is growing rapidly, and China aims to drive the United States out of the region by adopting its own version of the Monroe Doctrine. To U.S. observers, China has become more assertive in the South China Sea, expanding its activities and even bullying some of its smaller neighbors. This development has to be countered. Hence, U.S. officials have recently proclaimed that "the United States is back" and spoken of "America's Pacific century."

Essentially, the administration would like to push back China's growing influence in the region.

In the eyes of Beijing, however, the United States recently fanned the fire in the areas surrounding China. A good example is Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks about the South China Sea as a "U.S. national interest" made during the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting. Afterward, Washington abetted Vietnam and the Philippines to confront China through measures such as setting up 2+2 (foreign and defense ministers) consultations and providing new arms to these states. The U.S. administration made use of the *Cheonan* incident and the Diaoyu trawler clash to draw closer its alliances with South Korea and Japan. Washington also drastically adjusted its policies toward Myanmar, and President Obama's recent visit to that country was the first ever by a U.S. president. In sum, from Beijing's perspective, the United States does not want China's rise to affect American predominance and thus has tried to contain China.

My view is that each side has to some extent exaggerated the other side's unfriendly intentions and that this could lead to an upward spiral of mutual suspicion. This prospect makes candid dialogues at the top level and between the two militaries ever more important. As a way to deal with suspicions and avoid a clash, Beijing has called for building a "new type of great-power relationship," which is also mentioned in the 18th Party Congress report Hu Jintao delivered. This idea assumes that conflict between a rising power and a dominant power can be avoided and efforts to do so must be made. This is China's key strategic objective and also the meaning of "peaceful rise." After all, the two great powers need to explore and strive for outcomes that are good for both nations. Throughout the process, strategic distrust and mutual suspicion will likely linger and will not dissipate easily. Nevertheless, they can be managed and controlled through meaningful efforts. Cool heads must prevail.

Reconciling Perceptions

An important gap needs to be narrowed—the gap that can be discerned between China's and other countries' perceptions. For many foreign observers, dramatic changes in China's foreign policy occurred in 2009 and 2010, and the word "assertive" has been repeatedly used to characterize these perceived changes. This conventional wisdom is not shared by Chinese policymakers, however. A basic fact is those were the same years during which Hu Jintao was in office. At least President Hu did

not dictate the perceived changes and neither did his associates at the top, though such changes might have happened at the lower levels. Events that prompted outside observers to argue that China adopted a “nationalist” diplomacy include China’s role in the Copenhagen conference on climate change in December 2009, its response to the U.S. announcement of arms sales to Taiwan the next month, its handling of the crisis that resulted from the sinking of the South Korean warship the *Cheonan*, its policy toward the South China Sea, and its handling of the fishing trawler incident in the waters around the Diaoyu Islands. All these were extremely complex processes that involved implementation by lower-level policymakers rather than decision-making at the highest levels, except for the September 2010 crisis over Diaoyu, which inevitably drew serious attention from top leadership. Even Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi’s response to Hillary Clinton’s deliberate “surprise attack” during the July 2010 ARF meeting was seen as assertive. It would have been surprising, however, if Yang had sat in the room without offering any response to such an intentional and seemingly unfriendly move against China in the name of freedom of navigation. In fact, freedom of navigation had not been a problem in the South China Sea. I tend to believe the media has exaggerated and overly read into China’s behaviors and misled people.

My own view is that there were no strategic changes during Hu and Wen’s tenure. Changes might have happened at the implementation levels that deviated from earlier, more prudent practices. For example, cutting the Vietnamese survey cable in disputed waters in May 2011 was an action conducted by the Chinese enforcement ship on the site and not the result of an instruction from above. A pendulum swings, but it swings within a certain range. What we saw was the swinging back of the pendulum of China’s foreign policy in 2011 and 2012, until Beijing had no choice but to respond strongly to Japan’s nationalizing the Diaoyu Islands in September 2012. For China, this claim to nationalization was a serious step in the direction of changing the status quo of the islands. Beijing has made it clear that Tokyo has to abandon the idea that China will one day accept the islands as Japanese. The position that there is no territorial dispute is completely unacceptable to the nation and people of China. But in the meantime, a new reality of tension is emerging. ◆

North Korean Exceptionalism and South Korean Conventionalism: Prospects for a Reverse Formulation?

Sung-Yoon Lee

North Korea is “uniquely unique.” It is the world’s sole Communist hereditary dynasty; the world’s only literate, industrialized, urbanized peacetime economy to have suffered a famine; the world’s most cultish totalitarian system; and the world’s most secretive, isolated country—albeit one with the world’s largest military in terms of manpower and defense spending proportional to population and national income.

The other Korea, the one south of the 38th parallel, is a global leader in trade, shipping, automobiles, and electronics. It is also a free democratic polity. And on December 19, South Korea elected Park Geun-hye as president. Park is the first elected female leader in Korea and also in Confucian civilization, which consists of China, Japan, the two Koreas, Taiwan, Singapore, and Vietnam and makes up nearly a quarter of the world’s population.

The contrast between the two Koreas could hardly be starker. One is a model failed state, whereas the other is a model success story. Indeed, the sum total of North Korea’s realities renders it fascinating, often appalling, occasionally threatening, and almost always misunderstood. Yet the failed North continues to provoke the successful South with verbal threats, actual military attacks, and weapons tests, with a view toward reaping continued economic concessions. What explains this unconventional Korean dynamic and how will this dynamic play out in 2013? This essay depicts the top five myths about North Korea that have policy implications and offers a prescription for debunking them to the second Obama administration and to the new Park administration, which will take office in February 2013.

First is the myth that North Korea would dismantle its nuclear weapons program if not for Washington’s hostile policy. The phrase “U.S. hostile policy” is a staple of official North Korean statements regarding the United States. It is also a belief that is deeply embedded in the North Korean people’s consciousness through constant indoctrination. In North Korean historiography, the United States divided Korea (which is partially

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true—the Soviet Union was also an equal partner), started the Korean War (which is false—North Korea invaded the South), and constantly seeks to invade North Korea (which is false—Washington harbors no such impulse because it is simply too risky).

When hostile rhetoric emerges from the White House—for example, George W. Bush including North Korea in the “axis of evil” in 2002—or when the United States launches wars elsewhere, such as the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 or Iraq in 2003, Pyongyang’s claim seems credible and, to some observers, even worthy of sympathy. But the fact is that Pyongyang has relentlessly pursued a nuclear weapons program for decades and, like all other nuclear weapons–possessing states, is unlikely to dismantle its nuclear arsenal in exchange for political or economic concessions.

Washington may be no friend of Pyongyang. But the strategic and symbolic value of the acquisition of a credible nuclear arsenal for the Kim regime should be taken at face value: nuclear weapons equal power and prestige like no other for North Korea, which fares extremely poorly in nearly all conventional indices of state power: political, economic, and soft power, not to mention territorial and population size. The one index in which it fares well is military power.

As a corollary of the above, the second myth is that Pyongyang’s periodic provocative actions, such as attacks on South Korea or nuclear and long-range missile tests, are “self-defensive” measures against a threatening Seoul and Washington. In other words, these actions are less manifestations of Pyongyang’s strategy than reactions to external stimuli. Such a patronizing view of the North Korean leadership does not comport with the record. Within the past year alone, North Korea has threatened to turn the South Korean presidential mansion into a “sea of fire,” launch precision strikes against several South Korean media outlets (even citing the map coordinates of their head offices in Seoul), and launch a “merciless military strike” against South Korean activists attempting to send balloons filled with anti-North Korean leaflets into the North. Such threats by Pyongyang against South Korean civilians fit the technical definition of international terrorism. Yet many in the South Korean public are prone to blaming the South Korean government or fellow citizens instead of North Korea in the face of such invectives.

Consider also the timing of Pyongyang’s provocations. North Korea’s latest bomb threat came less than 60 days before South Korea’s presidential election on December 19. On December 1, North Korea announced that between December 10 and 22 it would conduct a rocket test in order to launch

a satellite into orbit. On December 8, North Korea announced that the test might be delayed, triggering speculation that perhaps Beijing had pressured Pyongyang to postpone or cancel the launch. On December 10, North Korea extended the launch window to December 29, even offering a specific technical reason for the presumed delay. Then on December 12, one week before South Korea's presidential election, North Korea caught most people off guard and carried out its first-ever successful long-range missile test.

The last few weeks leading up to the election provided an opportune time for Pyongyang to jolt the South's electorate, instill in the public the fear of possible war and the consequent loss of lives and treasure, and intimidate ordinary citizens into voting for the candidate of "peace and reconciliation," the pro-North Korea leaning progressive Moon Jae-in, who is the former chief of staff of president Roh Moo-hyun. North Korea has ten years of experience in reaping rewards from periodic provocations against the South during the period of the so-called Sunshine Policy, when Seoul pumped unconditional aid worth billions of dollars in cash, food, and fertilizer into Pyongyang's palace economy. A return to that kind of lucrative arrangement would enhance Kim Jong-un's leadership credentials at home and enable the young leader to deal with Seoul from a position of strength. The week-long window between the missile test and the election was an ideal length of time for Pyongyang to matter in the campaign without fading from memory.

Moreover, Pyongyang's first nuclear test came on October 9, 2006, on the eve of Party Founding Day, one of the most important North Korean national holidays. Earlier in July that year, Pyongyang tested seven missiles, including one long-range rocket, on the United States' Independence Day. Its second nuclear test came on the United States' Memorial Day in 2009. Examples abound of Pyongyang deliberately raining on Seoul's parade and taking provocative actions on a Sunday, thus capturing global headlines for that week and pressuring its adversaries to respond. Pyongyang clearly has its own strategic agenda and does not merely react to signals out of Washington or Seoul.

The third myth is that North Korea seeks economic reform and opening like China but cannot accomplish this because of opposition from the "hawks" in the military. "The military won't let us" used to be a common message skillfully employed by Mao Zedong against the Western powers. Competing interests no doubt lie between the party and the military in the North Korean system, as they did in Mao's China. But North Korea today, like China under Mao, still very much has a party-dominated power structure, wherein the party makes key personnel decisions concerning

top military officers. The Kim regime has developed and preserved a power structure like none other in history. Its nearly total monopolization of power and control over the military through schemes involving mutual surveillance, incentives, and purges make a bold stand by the military against government policy exceedingly unlikely, at least for the time being. Presumptions of power struggles between North Korean “doves” and “hawks,” or “reformists” and “hardliners,” that bear on key national policy are an amalgamation of Pyongyang’s strategic canard and the outside world’s imagination.

Fourth, there is the myth that Kim Jong-un will change North Korea like Deng Xiaoping changed China because Kim, like Deng, lived in Europe. Yet so did Pol Pot and Bashar al-Assad. In reality, China was unencumbered with an existential contest for legitimacy at the time of its economic reforms, as was Vietnam; that is, neither had to deal with an alternative, more attractive China or Vietnam luring away its population. By contrast, Pyongyang must continually cope with a far richer and freer Korea across the border, the Korean state of choice for so many North Koreans. The Kim regime thus sees reform and opening as an existential threat rather than a path toward a better future.

The fifth myth is that if North Korea provokes the South, Seoul will retaliate against Pyongyang. The historical record is actually quite the opposite. Even after the most egregious provocations, such as the North attempting to assassinate the South Korean president (January 1968 and October 1983) or shooting down a U.S. spy plane in international air space (April 1969), neither Seoul nor Washington retaliated militarily. In recent years, in fact, the more Pyongyang has provoked Seoul, the more Seoul has tried to appease Pyongyang. In the wake of North Korea torpedoing the *Cheonan*, a South Korean corvette, on March 26, 2010, Seoul’s response was limited to stopping unconditional aid, issuing rhetorical threats about resuming propaganda broadcasts across the border (which were never implemented), and winning a nonbinding UN Security Council presidential statement that did not even identify North Korea as the culprit. In the aftermath of North Korea’s shelling of Yeonpyeong Island on November 23, 2010, Seoul mustered up the courage to conduct live fire drills the next month in the face of North Korean threats. This led to the perception, particularly pronounced in Washington, that the South was ready to retaliate and even eager for revenge. But within two months, on February 1, 2011, South Korean president Lee Myung-bak announced that he would be open to a summit meeting with the North Korean leader. In May 2011

the two sides held secret meetings, with Seoul even asking for a series of summits with Kim Jong-il.

Thus, it is not surprising that Pyongyang believed that meaningful reprisal was unlikely from even provoking Seoul with a long-range missile test before the December presidential election in an attempt to give momentum to the progressive candidate. Pyongyang calculated that the change in the dynamics of inter-Korean relations if a pro-Sunshine Policy leader were to take office in Seoul next February would also help steer Japan, the single-biggest potential supplier of lump-sum cash to Pyongyang, toward resuming diplomatic normalization talks with North Korea. Such a development would raise the tantalizing possibility of \$10 billion or more in “economic cooperation” from Japan for the Kim regime, a sum that has been mentioned in previous talks. This is certainly the greatest cash infusion that Pyongyang could expect from any country or international financial institution in the foreseeable future.

The incoming Park Geun-hye administration and the second Obama administration should shatter this myth by doing more than just reacting to Pyongyang’s provocations with military deterrence, financial sanctions, and on-and-off diplomatic engagement. The two allies would do well to remember that a credible threat is the best deterrent against Pyongyang’s repeated provocations—not only the threat of the use of force but also a campaign to change the North Korean people’s minds through, for example, launching balloons filled with anti-Kim regime leaflets into the secretive state. Since Pyongyang clearly bristles at attempts to affect public opinion in the North, South Korea and the United States should take the initiative and redouble such efforts by sponsoring, in addition to balloon launches, expanded radio broadcasts and other campaigns that expose the regime’s excesses. The two allies already have a mandate to improve human rights in North Korea. They could, and should, do more to fulfill that mandate and implement an all-out campaign.

Park indicated during her election campaign that she will take on this grave challenge. Laying out her foreign and unification policies, Park stated on November 5, “We cannot go on neglecting the suffering of the North Korean people, the very people who will be the main actors in a unified Korea. In order to advance humanitarianism and human rights I will enact the North Korean Human Rights Act and will continually raise such issues

with the international community.”¹ Park further pledged that she will try to prevent the forcible repatriation of North Koreans and also strengthen “the resettlement support program and tailored support system for North Korean defectors,” so that “each one of them may maximize their talents to their full potential.”² Three days later, North Korea gave Park a ringing endorsement, claiming that Park had revealed her “wild dream of achieving ‘unification through absorption,’” making “such disgusting remarks as ‘the law on human rights in the north’ and ‘defectors to the south’ which Lee [Myung-bak] dared not do at the outset of his office.”³

It remains to be seen whether Park will actually make raising the human rights issue a high priority. But the argument for this policy, especially in the long-term, is overwhelming—all the more so in view of the underwhelming achievements of past policies. With sustained government sponsorship of human rights activism, the balloon launchers, for example, will be in a position to send messages of hope to the North Korean people with greater frequency and volume, and without the kind of publicity and the consequent risk of reprisal from Pyongyang. The United States and South Korea should also drastically increase support of radio broadcasts into North Korea. Nearly 50% of North Koreans who have defected to the South say that they came into contact with outside information primarily through South Korean TV shows on DVD and radio broadcasts, which served as an incentive to escape their nation. Washington and Seoul should remember that sending information into North Korea saves lives.

Pyongyang will resume its bluster and broadside in the face of sustained pressure on its chief vulnerability: the brutal repression of its people. But the Kim regime knows only too well that fighting off balloons and information over airwaves with bullets and bombs is a costly and politically impractical policy. Even at the height of the Cold War, the North never countered the constant anti-regime propaganda from the South with guns. In fact, the greater the international spotlight on the terrible conditions of life in North Korea, the less likely Pyongyang is to stir up a new crisis.

¹ Park Geun-hye, “*Trustpolitik* and a New Korea: Foreign Affairs, National Security, and Unification Policies Statement” [in Korean, author’s translation], November 5, 2012 ≈ http://www.saenuriparty.kr/web/news/tv/mainTvView.do?tvdiv=all&tvId=HTV_00000000355125. An English summary of these statements is available at http://www.saenuriparty.kr/web/eng/gnpPolicy/readPolicyView.do?bbsId=EBD_00000000358109.

² Ibid.

³ “Park Geun Hye Accused of Making Public Her Confrontation Policy Commitments,” Korean Central News Agency, November 9, 2012.

Kim Jong-un's youth and inexperience make the regime particularly vulnerable at this time. As much as the regime will attempt to control public opinion through fear tactics, a proactive and sustained effort by Seoul and Washington to plant the seeds of dissent in the North Korean populace can only strengthen their position vis-à-vis Pyongyang over the long run. Even a ruthless totalitarian regime is viable only as long as public opinion supports it. This principle, as David Hume tells us, applies "to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular."⁴

When the North Korean people will demand more of their ruthless dictatorship or turn outright against it cannot be predicted. But the more information about the outside world they receive, the sooner that eventuality will occur. And we can be certain that to passively continue mythologizing North Korea will not change Pyongyang's behavior. ◆

⁴ David Hume, "Of the First Principles of Government," in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* (1742) ~ <http://www.constitution.org/dh/pringovt.htm>.