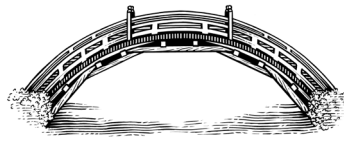


ROUNDTABLE

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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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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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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