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Korea's New Leaders and Prospects for Reconciliation

ABSTRACT

The Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea since 1972 have attempted reconciliation, but without durable success. The latter's building of a nuclear arsenal erased the progress achieved in 1989–1992 and 1998–2008. Assessed here is whether the new leaders of both Koreas since 2012 might be able to resume progress toward reconciliation. Ultimately, Park alone cannot sustain progress toward reconciliation unless she receives substantial domestic political support and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un responds constructively to her effort.

KEYWORDS: Korean unification, South Korea, North Korea, Park Geun-hye, Kim Jong-un

INTRODUCTION

South–North Korean rivalry, since their conception as separate nations in 1948, has motivated their globally recognized accomplishments. The two estranged countries, the Republic of Korea (South Korea, ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea, DPRK), recovered from Japanese colonization (1910–45) and rebuilt after DPRK leader Kim Il-sung's failed attempt at forcible unification during the Korean War (1950–53). Separately, the ROK has won the world's respect with its rapid industrialization, participation in the world market and international organizations, and democratization; the DPRK has moved in a different direction. Despite stringent foreign economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, Pyongyang has built a formidable military, backed by a technologically advanced military–industrial complex that has developed nuclear weapons capability. Yet, neither Korea has successfully addressed national division. Until at least durable reconciliation is accomplished, both Koreas' accomplishments could evaporate in a second Korean War.

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NEW LEADERS, NEW HOPE

The new leadership in both Koreas since 2012 brings new hope that reconciliation might resume. DPRK Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un inherited his father Kim Jong-il's authority in December 2011. His southern counterpart, ROK President Park Geun-hye, daughter of former ROK president Park Chung-hee, won election in December 2012 on a platform that included resumption of South–North reconciliation. Kim claimed a similar goal but during his first two years in power seemed preoccupied with consolidating his position and broadcasting to the world confidence in his military's might.

Prospects for jointly pursuing reconciliation seemed bleak, particularly after Pyongyang's period of "March madness" in the late spring–early summer of 2013. Immediately after Park's inauguration on February 25, 2013, the DPRK initiated an escalating spiral of insults aimed at Park and provocative threats aimed at the ROK.¹ The day of Park's inauguration, the DPRK Armed Forces Ministry spokesman compared Park's authority to "the swish of the skirt made by the owner of Chongwadae (South Korea's presidential residence.)" Then on March 5, 2013, the Korean People's Army Supreme Command (KPASC) declared it "will make the Korean Armistice totally nullified." The DPRK Foreign Ministry followed on March 7, 2013, by repeating Supreme Commander Kim Jong Un's January 1, 2013, "New Year Address" declaration that "If the aggressors (ROK and US) dare launch a preemptive attack against our sacred country, the People's Army should mercilessly annihilate them and win victory in the war for the country's reunification."² The UN Security Council's (UNSC) imposition of sanctions on the DPRK on March 7, 2013 because of Pyongyang's December 12, 2012 launching of a satellite and third nuclear test on February 12, 2013 prompted the outbursts. By March's end the Korean Peninsula was on the verge of war. Pyongyang's purpose remains unclear. Its leaders, particularly the generals, may have sought to test Park's commitment to reconciliation, as had been done soon after ROK President Kim Dae-jung assumed office in 1999. Whatever the motives, Park responded with calm resolve. She had won election by a narrow 2% margin while walking a fine line between firmness toward the DPRK and economic cooperation. She waved the big stick of the

1. C. Kenneth Quinones, "March Madness: The Korean Peninsula's Annual War of Words," *Journal of Political Criticism* [Seoul, Korea] 12:5 (May 2013), pp. 197–210.

2. <www.ncnk.org/resources/news-items/kinm-jong-uns-speeches>, January 1, 2013.

US–ROK alliance, warning that she would forcefully retaliate for any armed North Korean attack, yet also consistently urged reconciliation. US Secretary of State John Kerry visited Beijing and Seoul in early April 2013 to confirm US assurances that it would back the Park administration.³ Park also called on Beijing and Moscow to restrain their North Korean ally, but Pyongyang persisted, to the point of shutting down the joint South–North Kaesong Industrial Zone (KIZ) project, despite Park’s offers to engage in negotiations. Still, the belief that prospects for reconciliation’s resumption had been smashed proved premature. After Pyongyang halted its provocations, the two Koreas reopened the KIZ on September 16, 2013.⁴ Still, occasionally the verbal dueling heated up. The North flew unmanned drones south into the ROK. On November 23, 2010, the KPA bombarded the tiny South Korean island of Yeonpyeong which is located west of South Korea’s capital in the Yellow Sea. Four South Koreans died and 19 were injured in the incident. The immediate cause was the long simmering dispute over the so-called North Limit Line (NLL) drawn by the United Nations Command (UNC) in Seoul to discourage South Korean fishermen from venturing too close to North Korea’s southwest coast. But both sides restrained themselves and avoided escalation.⁵ Ever since, the two Koreas have sought common ground. By February 2014, bilateral dialogue resumed with a series of meetings. Park’s Dresden Declaration, proclaiming new ideas for reunification, followed on March 28, but Pyongyang promptly dismissed the proposal for separated-family reunions, humanitarian aid, and social exchanges as a “psychopath’s daydream.”⁶

Nevertheless, on May 23, the DPRK announced that it would accept Seoul’s invitation and send athletes to the 2014 Asian Games in Incheon, Seoul Korea. Then, quietly, on July 7, Kim Jong-un’s government issued a specific formula for the resumption of reconciliation.⁷ The statement commemorated Kim

3. “Remarks of Secretary of State John Kerry with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea Yun Byung-se after Their Meeting,” April 2, 2013. <<http://go.usa.gov/3yPdJ>>.

4. “Korea’s Restart Operations at Kaesong Industrial Zone,” *BBC News*, September 16, 2013. <<http://BBC.com.co.uk/news/world-asia-24104774>>.

5. Andrew Salmon, “Korean Tension: A Look at the Conflict,” CNN.com, November 23, 2010. <<http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/11/23/koreas.clash.explainer/index.html>>.

6. “President Park’s Dresden Declaration” and “National Defense Commission (NDC) Statement,” *Vantage Point* 37:5 (May 2014), pp. 8–12.

7. Kim Jong-un on July 7, 2014, issued a proposal for the resumption of reconciliation that essentially summarized the key items previously agreed upon in the June 15, 2000, and October 4,

Il-sung's final reunification proposal prior to his 1994 death. The unexpected announcement listed four steps Seoul would have to take before reconciliation could resume:

1. End "reckless hostility and confrontation" which Pyongyang defined as ending "North-targeted war exercises," and jointly implementing the June 15, 2000, South-North Declaration of ROK President Kim Dae-jung and DPRK leader Kim Jong-il, and the October 4, 2007, declaration issued by ROK President Roh Moo-hyun and DPRK leader Kim Jong-il.
2. To reject reliance on outsiders to settle Korea-related issues which was affirmation of the first joint South-North Declaration of July 4, 1972.
3. To seek reasonable reunification proposals that guarantee common prosperity.
4. To promote coexistence and co-prosperity, as set forth in the June 2000 declaration, by creating an atmosphere favorable to improving relations. This latter point apparently is a call for Seoul to drop its demand that Pyongyang apologize for past misdeeds. It also seems to urge Seoul to cease supporting UNSC sanctions imposed on Pyongyang because of its nuclear and ballistic missile tests.

The July 7, 2014, proposal was Kim Jong-un's definition of common ground for resuming the reconciliation process. It accents bilateral cooperation as concretely defined in previous bilateral accords. Actually, the two sides previously accomplished all these points. Even the reference to ending war exercises can be linked to Seoul's 1992 decision to discontinue its then largest military exercise with the US, Team Spirit. Pyongyang's reference to historical agreements (1992 Basic Agreements, 2000 Pyongyang Joint Statement, and 2007 Roh Moo-hyun–Kim Jong-il Joint Statement) suggests that future joint effort could repeat past success.

2007, South–North Korea joint declarations. The content of these agreements can be found in ROK Ministry of Unification, *Peace and Cooperation: White Paper on Korean Unification*, 2001 (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, 2001). Also see *The 2007 South–North Korean Summit* (Seoul: Vantage Point, 2007). Kim's proposal to South Korea was reported by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) in an article entitled "DPRK Government Statement Calls for Ending Confrontation and Improving North-South Ties." The Japanese government, however, shut down the web site, which had been maintained since 1997 by the Korean Residence Association of Japan (*Chosen soren*).

HISTORY'S LEGACY

The lack of enduring progress toward reconciliation says little about the two Koreas' past effort and success. Since their first dialogue in 1971–72, they have held 618 negotiation sessions, 2 summits (in 2000 between ROK President Kim Dae-jung and DPRK leader Kim Jong-il, and in 2007 between ROK President Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong-il), and 10 prime minister–level meetings. They have signed 230 agreements, including in December 1991 the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the 1992 Basic Agreements, which promised negotiation of a peace treaty, economic cooperation, social and educational exchanges, and mutual respect. The Kaesong Industrial Zone (KIZ) project is a result of the 2000 summit.⁸ Since 2000 they have conducted 19 family-reunion sessions, which involved 25,000 people. Success was achieved when there was: a. convergence of goals, b. separation between political and security issues, c. significant alteration in the geopolitical situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula, and d. no interference by foreign nations.

Inter-Korean dialogue proved impossible until 1971–72, primarily because Kim Il-sung's foremost goal was to achieve national unification by subverting the ROK government. He had no interest in dialogue or reconciliation. The ROK until 1971 was preoccupied with countering the North's offensive by pursuing economic prosperity and rallying international respect; Seoul had little to gain from dialogue. But in 1971 the conditions surrounding the Korean Peninsula abruptly changed. Both Seoul's foremost ally, the US, and Pyongyang's defender, China, shifted from confrontation to diplomatic and economic engagement. Also, the US was withdrawing from South Vietnam. Korea's two leaders reacted by engaging in their first-ever dialogue, and on July 4, 1972, issued their first joint statement, in which they pledged to pursue reconciliation and unification without foreign interference. In other words, reconciliation was to be a bilateral process. But no sooner had their fears of abandonment by their primary supporters waned than South–North dialogue ceased. Political turmoil in the South, prompted by South Korean President Park Chung-hee's increasingly authoritarian rule and often brutal suppression of dissent that began in 1971 and ended with his assassination in 1979, possibly convinced the North to sustain its campaigns of subversion

8. Kim Ki-woong [ROK Assistant Minister of Unification Policy], "South Korean Government's Initiative for Peaceful Unification of Korean Peninsula," *Vantage Point* 37:7 (July 2014), p. 26.

and terrorism. Seoul, meanwhile, became preoccupied with restoring domestic order.⁹

A second round of sustained South–North dialogue began in 1989. Again the two Koreas’ long-term goals coincided. The ROK had achieved impressive prosperity and rallied broad international respect with its successful hosting of the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympiad. The DPRK’s reliance on terrorism—as evident in DPRK agents’ November 12, 1987, bombing of Korean Airlines (KAL) flight 858, which killed 104 passengers and 11 crew members—had garnered it worldwide condemnation. This, combined with Seoul’s successful forging of diplomatic and commercial ties with Pyongyang’s allies, particularly the USSR and China, isolated the DPRK. ROK President Roh Tae-woo, reflecting Koreans’ hope that quick unification might be achieved as in Germany, labeled his policy toward North Korea “*Nordpolitik*” and offered to resume dialogue with the North. DPRK leader Kim Il-sung agreed. The denuclearization pledge and bilateral Basic Agreements followed.

But in July 1992, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) acquired evidence which suggested that Pyongyang had not declared the full extent of its plutonium production, as promised when it ratified earlier that year the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Progress toward reconciliation was abruptly reversed. However, US willingness to negotiate with North Korea defused the crisis and continued the process of engagement, except that Washington, not Seoul, assumed leadership. Pyongyang’s apparent freezing of nuclear activities and reduction of tension benefitted South–North relations, but mutual distrust persisted.

A third opportunity to pursue reconciliation materialized between 1998 and 2000. North Korea found itself in a desperate struggle for regime survival. After the USSR was formerly disbanded in 1991, its successor, Russia, no longer promised unqualified military and economic support. China followed in 1992. Virtually all of Pyongyang’s former allies, including the East European nations previously under communist party rule and eventually the USSR and People’s Republic of China (PRC), had established first commercial and then diplomatic ties to Seoul. Pervasive food shortages that began in 1990 and continued until 1999 caused severe malnourishment, even starvation,

9. C. Kenneth Quinones, “South Korea’s Approaches to North Korea: A Glacial Process,” in *Korean Security Dynamics in Transition*, ed. by Kyung-ae Park and Dalchoong Kim (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 19–48.

which threatened domestic political stability. North Korea's economy collapsed. Desperate, Pyongyang turned to its enemies—Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo—for help. Seoul's responded in 1998 with “Sunshine Diplomacy,” i.e. political and economic engagement. Again Pyongyang's policy priorities coincided with Seoul's quest for reconciliation. Unprecedented progress followed—until Pyongyang's first nuclear test, in 2006. Dismayed, South Korean voters in 2007 rejected engagement for confrontation and isolation of North Korea by electing Lee Myung-bak president. As they had done in 1992, both sides promptly reverted to confrontation. South Koreans nevertheless cling to the hope of unification, as discovered by a 2013 Hyundai Research Institute poll. Nearly 80% of voters age 40 and older believe that unification remains necessary to promote the nation's prosperity and peace, while 75% of voters in their thirties hold a similar view. Only younger voters in their twenties believe unification to be unnecessary.¹⁰

KOREA'S NEW LEADERS AND RECONCILIATION

Park Geun-hye and Kim Jong-un share their predecessors' daunting task of avoiding a second Korean War while striving to forge national reconciliation. As reviewed above, history suggests that success depends on several factors, including the matching of each side's priorities, but the past does not automatically repeat itself. Each leader's individual abilities and extent of domestic political support are equally important. Park seized the initiative prior to her election and campaigned on a platform that accented reconciliation on a *quid pro quo* basis. Her northern counterpart's initial response was hostility and personal insult, but the two sides eventually signaled a willingness to seek common ground. By mid-2014, they appeared to have found reasons to pursue cooperation.

For South Korea, reconciliation with North Korea is the best way to safeguard and promote its own prosperity. Conflict and the threat of war discourage foreign investment, and war would destroy Seoul's impressive economic gains. Looking to the future, unity would better enable Seoul to deal with China's rising economic prowess and address South Korea's problems of an aging and shrinking population. North Korea continues to regain

10. Lee Yong-hwa, “South Koreans' Increasing Awareness of the Need for Unification,” Hyundai Research Institute, *VIP Report No. 538* (Seoul, Korea, November 18, 2013).

its political and economic composure following the devastating events of the 1990s. Despite extensive international economic sanctions, according to the ROK's Bank of Korea, North Korea's real GDP increased 1.1% in 2013, the third consecutive year of growth. Its international trade amounted to USD 7.8 billion, a 7.8% increase over 2012, according to South Korea's Korea Trade Investment Promotion Agency.¹¹ Pyongyang's priorities appear to have shifted from regime survival to achieving prosperity, a goal Kim Jong-un shares with his late father.

Kim Jong-un must also deal with the relatively hostile international environment surrounding his small kingdom. The UNSC, plus Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington unilaterally, have imposed economic sanctions on the DPRK in an attempt to halt Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. These sanctions are a formidable impediment to Kim's pursuit of prosperity. The leaders of China, Russia, and the US have visited Seoul for summit meetings with President Park, but none has met Kim. Their preference for doing business with South Korea is obvious, and they have made clear their preference for the resumption of South–North reconciliation. After all, peace on the Korean Peninsula best coincides with their shared priorities of sustaining peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.

These facts suggest that South and North Korean policy priorities once again are coinciding, thus improving prospects for bilateral social and economic cooperation. North Korea's nuclear ambitions remain an impediment, but three times (1992, 2000, and 2007) both sides managed to achieve cooperation by demonstrating flexibility and exchanging concessions to restart reconciliation regardless of Pyongyang nuclear program.

PERSONAL FACTORS

Park and Kim share the burden of limited experience as political leaders. Park has benefited from years of political wheeling and dealing as a politician, but continues to face the challenges of ruling a politically complex democracy. Kim came to power with no political experience but has the advantage of ruling as a monarch. Yet he lacks legitimacy, which compels dependence on his closest advisers,

11. "North Korean Foreign Trade Volume Posts Record High of USD 7.3 Billion in 2013" Kyungnam University Institute for Far Eastern Studies, *IFES Briefs* [Seoul, Korea] 14:5, p. 26; "Real GDP of DPRK Grows in 2013," Kyungnam University Institute for Far Eastern Studies, *IFES Briefs* [Seoul, Korea] 14:7, p. 3.

particularly Pyongyang's generals. This is evident in the young Kim's inability to halt the political dueling and purges that have continued into 2015.¹²

Park Geun-hye is a paradox. The daughter of assassinated ROK president Park Chung-hee, she is South Korea's first woman president, and acquired her political power and legitimacy through a democratic election. She seeks reconciliation with North Korea despite her mother's assassination in 1974 by a pro-Pyongyang ethnic-Korean resident of Japan. Her family's tragic history appears to have forged within her a resolve to sustain her nation's democracy while pursuing reunification. Her gender, limited experience, and ambitious goals confront her with multiple challenges. Traditionally, Korean's Confucian heritage anointed men as the politically preferred gender. When late in the nineteenth century Queen Min, the wife of King Kojong, allegedly involved herself in court politics, Korean champions of "enlightenment" accused her of impeding Korea's modernization; Japanese advocates of Korea's complete independence from China assassinated her in 1895.¹³ Park Geun-hye does not have to contend with such a dangerous situation, but early in her administration she had to convince her male advisers and critics of her ability to lead the nation since her five-year office term limits the time available to achieve this.

Kim Jong-un seems at first glance to have several advantages over Park, but actually has two major disadvantages: he lacks both legitimacy and experience. Park's authority is firmly rooted in her democratic election, while Kim's is tied to a single fact: his father Kim Jong-il ruled the country. This profoundly limits his authority. Kim's grandfather Kim Il-sung enhanced his legitimacy by claiming to have won the nation's independence fighting the Japanese "imperialists" and to have saved it from the American "imperialists." Albeit exaggerated, North Koreans have little choice but to accept this version of history. But Kim Jong-un lacks any record of protecting the nation from "imperialists."

North Korea's second ruler, Kim Jong-il, lacked legitimacy other than being Kim Il-sung's son. Again history was distorted to embellish his legitimacy through the false claim that he had been born in a log cabin in his father's guerrilla camp at the base of Mount Paektu. Actually, Kim Jong-il was born and raised in Russia. For several years he was groomed to rule but protected from criticism behind the code-word "party center." In the 1980s he reportedly

12. Lee Kwang-ho, "Tough Challenges Facing Kim Jong-un in 2015," *Vantage Point* 38:1 (January 2015), pp. 2–9.

13. C. Kenneth Quinones, "The *Kunse Choson Chonggam* and Modern Korean Historiography," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40:2 (December 1980), pp. 507–548.

assumed oversight of domestic policy, yet, despite years of preparation, he still had to confront his lack of legitimacy. After he became Supreme Commander in 1994, he struck a deal with North Korea's generals to buttress his legitimacy by proclaiming *Seonggun jeongji* (military-first politics). Whatever the generals deemed necessary to defend the nation, they received, including nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

Kim Jong-un's handicaps are more formidable. He inherited his position with limited life experience and no record of military service, and after only brief preparation for governing. His study at an international high school in Switzerland surely aroused doubts about his comprehension of North Korea's *juche*. Usually translated "self-reliance," it actually means "self-determination," that is ideology and allegiance to North Korean-style socialism.

Although none outside Pyongyang's inner political circle can say for certain, Kim Jong-un may be a monarch, but he is hardly a dictator. Like his father, his lack of legitimacy compels him to depend extensively on advice from Pyongyang's political generals, which restricts his policy options. He must maintain his father's "military first" promise, as evident in the young Kim's position regarding a negotiated end to North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile arsenals. As stated on numerous occasions by spokesmen for the Foreign Ministry and the KPASC, the DPRK will not consider dismantling these arsenals until the US ends its "hostile policy" toward the DPRK and removes its nuclear umbrella over Northeast Asia. Kim Jong-un appears to be a "managed monarch," one surrounded by older and more experienced advisers intent on perpetuating their priorities, making him more a follower than an initiator. Some South Korean pundits guessed that Kim Jong-un would initiate economic reform and political liberalization because of his education outside North Korea. He has done neither thus far.

RECONCILIATION AND "TRUSTPOLITIK"

Park's 2012 presidential campaign platform included restarting reconciliation using "trustpolitik."¹⁴ Her predecessors Chun Doo-hwan (1980–87) and

14. Yun Byung-se (ROK Foreign Minister), "President Park Geun-hye's *Trustpolitik*: A New Framework for South Korea's Foreign Policy," <<http://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Policies/view?articleId=112986>>; Park Geun-hye, "A Plan for Peace in North Asia: Cooperation among Korea, China and Japan Needs a Correct Understanding of History," *Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2012 <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323894704578114310294100492>>.

Roh Tae-woo (1988–93) had successfully used *Nordpolitik*. Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun continued the process, but Park's immediate predecessor, Lee Myung-bak, reverted to confrontation. Park must proceed cautiously to avoid appearing "soft" on the North. Her "trustpolitik" links parallel approaches, as she explained in 2011: "First, North Korea must keep its agreements made with South Korea and the international community to establish a minimum level of trust, and second, there must be assured consequences for actions that breach the peace." As examples of prior success, she cited the US–China reconciliation in the 1970s and the 1979 Egypt–Israel peace treaty. Recalling her predecessors' efforts, she called for a new policy that involves aligning South Korea's security and cooperation with the North, and inter-Korean dialogue with parallel international efforts, i.e. the Six-Party Talks, which aim to end Pyongyang's nuclear program. This "alignment policy" requires Seoul's prompt and forceful response if North Korea again attacks the South, as it did twice in 2010. Otherwise, if North Korea moves toward "genuine reconciliation," Seoul should do likewise.

SOUTH KOREANS' DIVERGENT VIEWS ON RECONCILIATION

But first, Park must contend with the political realities in Seoul and Pyongyang. She faces a situation radically different from her predecessors. The events of the previous two decades have erased South Koreans' expectations of quick reconciliation followed by unification. Also gone is the expectation that cultural and educational exchanges plus economic cooperation could transform North Korea into a compatible member of the international community. Prior to democratization in 1988, the primary theme of political debate in South Korea was whether to preserve its authoritarian government or democratize. Some feared that democracy would weaken the nation's national defense posture vis-à-vis North Korea, while slowing progress toward prosperity. Advocates of democracy, South Korea's self-proclaimed "progressives," won this debate.

Since 1989, the foremost issue facing South Koreans remains whether to encourage North Korea toward reconciliation or to confront it. Progressives prefer the tactics of engagement in the hope of gradually transforming North Korea. They emphasize that the US shifted to the engagement of North

Korea beginning in 1988¹⁵ to end its nuclear program and to promote its transformation. They also point out that US engagement of China since 1972 helped change China from a belligerent threat into a responsible member of the international community. Conservatives, however, champion confrontation, which emphasizes the diplomatic and economic isolation of North Korea, particularly via tough economic sanctions backed by formidable military might, in the hope of collapsing the authoritarian regime. They also emphasize concern about Pyongyang's persistent pursuit of nuclear weapons and its record of broken promises in this regard. They argue that engagement's tactic of South–North economic cooperation funds, at least to some extent, North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. For progressives, the goal is a “soft landing,” which they believe will induce North Korea's gradual acceptance of international norms. Conservatives favor a “hard landing,” which means not just regime change but collapse, as a prelude to unification. President Park's approach attempts to straddle these polarities.

PYONGYANG'S INTERPRETATION OF RECONCILIATION

The two Koreas share the long-term goal of national unification, but their national priorities and definitions of reconciliation diverge significantly. North Korea's authoritarian political system spares its leadership from dealing with public opinion. North Korea's leaders have monopolized the prerogative of determining national goals and the methods to achieve them. Until the late 1980s, the foremost goal was national unification, whether achieved using armed force or otherwise. But several factors—Seoul's shifting in the 1980s of the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula to its favor, the USSR's collapse, China's establishment of diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992, Kim Il-sung's death in 1994, followed by famine and economic collapse—compelled Pyongyang to redefine its priorities. Regime survival replaced unification as the top priority. Kim Jong-il, after a faltering start, promised the KPA it could have whatever it needed to preserve the regime. He then proclaimed the surprising goal of achieving a “strong and prosperous nation” by 2012. Hindsight suggests that North Korea may have adopted a conciliatory posture toward reconciliation between 1989 and 1992, and

15. C. Kenneth Quinones, “North Korea: From Containment to Engagement,” in *North Korea after Kim Il Sung*, ed. by Dae-sook Suh and Chae-jin Lee (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), pp. 101–122.

between 1998 and 2002, more as a means to sustain the regime than to achieve reconciliation. Nevertheless, tensions on the Korean Peninsula subsided, and Pyongyang facilitated substantial social exchange and economic cooperation, yet continued to pursue its nuclear ambitions.

Then and now, South and North Korea appear to be talking past one another. South Koreans view reconciliation either as a way to set the stage for peaceful coexistence or as a prelude to the North's collapse and unification. But for Pyongyang, reconciliation is a means to ensure regime survival by achieving political and economic parity with Seoul. For both, unification remains a distant goal. Thus, Kim Jong-un rejects Park's persistent calls to discard its nuclear ambitions as a prelude to resuming reconciliation. For Kim, nuclear deterrence is the cornerstone of his defense policy. Also, Kim's political legitimacy is linked to pursuing his father's priorities, i.e. regime survival, as defined by his forefathers' *juche* ideology. This reality poses a formidable impediment to Park's "trustpolitik."

PYONGYANG'S PRIORITIES

Pyongyang's provocative behavior between February and April 2013, and the subsequent confrontation with Seoul over KIZ in April and May, could have had the secondary purpose of buttressing Kim Jong-un's stature as a leader by demonstrating his coolheaded and decisive leadership in the face of the perceived "imperialist" threat posed by additional UNSC sanctions. His policy statements and official activities since coming to power suggest that his priorities are to maintain a formidable military and to consolidate his power. Reconciliation was a secondary, longer-term concern. In his January 1, 2013, New Year's address,¹⁶ Kim listed his priorities as "consolidating our political and military might" by "building . . . an economic giant," particularly with "larger numbers [sic] of sophisticated military hardware," and enhancing "party organizations' . . . militant function and role," in order to achieve "reunification," which he called the "greatest national task."

Until mid-2014, Kim concentrated on rallying the confidence of the KPA and the ruling Korean Workers' Party (KWP), politically the most potent groups in North Korea. Early 2013 was devoted to reinforcing his legitimacy

16. "2013 New Year Address," by Kim Jong Un <http://www.ncnk.org/resources/resources/publications/KJU_New_Years_2013.pdf>.

by acting out before North Korean media a “command performance,” as he instructed the KPA to deter an imagined possible US and ROK attack during their annual joint military exercises, Key Resolve and Foal Eagle. On March 2 he visited the Joint Security Area (JSA). Located in the middle of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that has divided the two Koreas since the Korean War Armistice was signed on July 27, 1953, the JSA is about 30 kilometers north of Seoul and frequently incorrectly referred to as Panmunjom. The JSA is visited daily by tourist from both Pyongyang and Seoul. Nevertheless, Kim’s generals and mass media lauded his visit as being “courageous.”¹⁷ The Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) reported on March 20 that he had directed drone and rocket attack drills. Next, according to the KCNA, he oversaw work “in different fields of the KPA,” which included the making of musical instruments and children’s overcoats and the holding of chorus practices. The next day he was guiding an army amphibious landing drill. He ended March by ratifying a plan to “mercilessly strike the US mainland” if the “US imperialists” make a “reckless provocation with a huge strategic forces.”¹⁸

By April 15, the “crisis” had passed and, according to the KCNA, he was enjoying sports competitions, a concert and paying respect to his grandfather and father at Kumsusan Palace. Kim’s efforts to rally the KWP’s allegiance included a January 28 speech to the 4th Meeting of KWP Secretaries of Party Cells. Next he addressed economic issues at the National Meeting of Light Industrial Workers on March 18. On March 31, he reportedly “guided” a Plenary Meeting of the KWP Central Committee.

Meanwhile, Kim authorized the issuance of numerous policy directives. The National Defense Commission (NDC), generally recognized as the most potent policy body, defined the issues for other agencies’ commentary. It declared that the DPRK’s nuclear capability is no longer a topic for negotiation, directed the closing of the KIZ, and blamed Park for Korea’s woes. The KPASC pointedly criticized the US–ROK joint military exercises and declared the Korean War Armistice Agreement “null and void.”¹⁹ The KPA

17. C. Kenneth Quinones, “March Madness: The Korean Peninsula’s Annual War of Words,” *Journal of Political Criticism* 12:5 (May 2013) pp. 197–209; Lee Kwang-ho, “Political Situation after N. Korea’s Nuclear Detonation,” *Vantage Point* 36:4 (April 2013), pp. 2–7.

18. C. Kenneth Quinones, “March Madness: The Korean Peninsula’s Annual War of Words,” *Journal of Political Criticism* 12:5 (May 2013), p. 203.

19. C. Kenneth Quinones, “March Madness: The Korean Peninsula’s Annual War of Words,” *Journal of Political Criticism* 12:5 (May 2013), pp. 201–202.

accused the US and South Korea of threatening “pre-emptive nuclear war,” thus “compelling” the DPRK to build a nuclear arsenal.

The DPRK blamed the South for problems regarding the KIZ, and criticized Park and her administration for “insulting” the DPRK’s sovereignty. The Foreign Ministry criticized the UNSC sanctions (imposed because of Pyongyang’s December 2012 satellite launch and February 2913 nuclear test), warned repeatedly that the DPRK “will exercise the right to a preemptive nuclear attack” if threatened, declared that the Korean War Armistice will become totally nullified once the “US nuclear war rehearsal gets into full swing,” ruled out negotiations with the US “unless it rolls back its hostile policy,” and reiterated that the DPRK’s nuclear deterrent capability is no longer open to negotiation.²⁰ These statements’ uniform belligerence suggests intent to warn Pyongyang’s adversaries not to expect Kim to be conciliatory. They also highlight his resolve to pursue his predecessors’ priorities, regime survival above all.

Kim Jong-un’s theatrics may have impressed his generals and party cadre, but not North Korea’s primary supporters, China and Russia, nor its adversaries. They publicly urged Pyongyang to restrain itself. Kim was clearly unconcerned about reconciliation early in his reign, since his provocative words and deeds erased most of reconciliation’s progress, a position further implied by his simplistic formula that resuming reconciliation required pursuing it in “an independent manner” by implementing the “North-South joint declarations” of 1972, 1992, 2000, and 2007.

While Kim’s demeanor became a source of international concern, Park was calmly rallying domestic and international support through the formation of an effective administration, meeting world leaders, and reiterating her intent to pursue reconciliation. Kim has ruled twice as long as Park, but Park’s self-confidence has steadily increased as she successfully broadened her domestic base of political support and rallied international respect. This positioned her to seize the initiative regarding reconciliation, as became evident on May 23, 2014 when Pyongyang accepted Seoul’s invitation to the 2014 Incheon Asian Games and Kim enunciated on July 7, 2014, a specific formula regarding reconciliation. (See footnote 7 above.)

20. Quinones, “March Madness,” p. 205.

KOREA–JAPAN RELATIONS

Before Park can turn to pursuing reconciliation it is imperative that she further reinforce domestic confidence in her presidential skills. Her handling of Tokyo is accomplishing this. All Koreans disdain imperial Japan's abusive treatment of Korea and some Japanese politicians' rationalization of it. For Park, improving relations with Japan is not a priority. But it remains Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's priority, prompting him to make repeated overtures to her. Park has responded with polite tough-mindedness while she awaits confirmation through Abe's words and deeds that he has forgone rationalization of imperial Japan's wartime misconduct.

Early in his administration, Abe sought to improve relations by sending special envoy Nukaga Fukushima to meet president-elect Park in Seoul in January 2013. They agreed to "make a mutual effort to build trust" regarding divisive issues. Abe next dispatched Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro to Park's inauguration, but their meeting yielded no positive results. On March 10 Abe called Park to congratulate her and urged "candid exchanges of opinions," reportedly said that he looked forward to meeting her in Seoul at the forthcoming China–Korea–Japan summit, and invited her to Tokyo. Park was noncommittal.²¹ Then the deputy prime minister and about 80 members of Abe's ruling Liberal Democratic Party visited *Yasukuni* Shrine, long an irritant in Japan's relations with its neighbors. China and South Korea promptly protested because Class A Japanese war criminals—Imperial Japan's highest ranking policy-making officials convicted by the International War Crimes Tribunal in Tokyo between 1946 and 1947 for having participated in a conspiracy to start and to wage war against China and WWII in the Pacific between 1931 and 1945—are enshrined there. Park cancelled her foreign minister's visit to Tokyo and concurred with China's refusal to attend a China–ROK–Japan summit previously scheduled for May 25–26.²²

Again Abe attempted to calm his neighbors by rejecting reports that he and his administration would not honor the 1995 Murayama Statement, in which

21. "Park, Abe Call for Better Bilateral Ties," Chosun.com, March 7, 2013 <http://english.Chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/03/07/20130307096.html>.

22. "Foreign Minister Cancels Japan Trip" *Chosun Ilbo*, April 23, 2013 <http://english.Chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/04/23/2013042300923.html>; "Japan's Drift to the Far Right Hurts Stability in Northeast Asia," April 23, 2013 <http://english.Chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/04/23/2013042301185.html>; "Park Has No Plan for Summit with Abe," *Chosun Ilbo*, July 2, 2013 <http://english.Chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/07/02/2013070201347.html>.

then Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi, a socialist, officially apologized for imperial Japan's "invasion" of China and Korea. In 2006, during his first term, Abe had expressed doubts about the accuracy of the apology's terminology, outraging Beijing and Seoul. After several months of vacillation, Abe's Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide formally confirmed on March 23, 2014, that the Abe administration would not revise the apology and recognized that imperial Japan's military had coerced Asian women to become "sex slaves."²³ Relations nevertheless remained icy. The ROK and Japanese foreign ministers finally met at the ASEAN Regional Forum on July 1, but ROK Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se reportedly told his Japanese counterpart, Kishida Fumio, that "unless they are handled carefully, historical issues can end up hurting the spirit of an individual nation." Kishida reportedly said, "Japan and South Korea are important neighbors that share basic values and interests and are precious partners." Yun countered, "[President] Park believes that close efforts by South Korea and Japan are important for peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region."²⁴

Park's response to Abe has reassured most South Koreans of her patriotism, vital to sustaining popular support given her father's service in the Imperial Japanese Army. Also, many South Koreans today are displeased with the treaties her father negotiated with Japan to normalize relations in 1965. Again she has had to walk a tightrope between displeasing South Koreans and the Japanese. She appears to have done this successfully by not quickly giving Abe what he seeks while firmly but politely insisting that Japan must do more to convince South Koreans that Japan's past expressions of regret for imperial Japan's misdeeds are sincere.

An ROK-Japan summit had yet to convene as of August 17, 2015. Other than exchanging cordial greetings at international gatherings, Park and Abe have yet to meet formally. Park expressed disappointment in Abe's August 15, 2015, speech that marked the end of WWII, noting that he did not specify any "sincere actions" to erase long lingering ill feelings regarding Japan's perceived misconduct toward Korea between 1910 and 1945.²⁵

23. "Suga: Japan Won't Revise Wartime Brothel Apology," *Asahi Shimbun*, March 24, 2014 <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201403240090>.

24. "Japan Fails to Thaw Icy Ties with South Korea, No Summit in Sight," *Asahi shimbun*, March 24, 2014 <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201403240090>.

25. "Park Says Abe's War-End Speech Left 'Much to be Desired,'" *Japan Times*, August 15, 2015 <<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/08/15/national/history/park-says-abes-surrender-anniversary-speech-left-much-to-be-desired>>.

Kim Jong-un, less concerned than Park with public opinion, responded positively in July 2014 to Abe's requests to reopen the investigation of the status of the Japanese abducted by North Korean agents some 30 years ago and the several thousand ethnic-Korean Japanese citizens who migrated to North Korea with their spouses between 1959 and 1982. Pyongyang had promised to report its findings by the end of September 2014, but first postponed and since has avoided reporting the investigation's findings. It is doubtful that any future DPRK investigation report will placate the Japanese people. As of mid-2015, Japan–DPRK relations remain icy. In any event, the Japanese public and political leaders' preference to work with South Korea benefits Park because it makes Tokyo prone to support her reconciliation policy.

PARK LAUNCHES TRUSTPOLITIK

Park Geun-hye's most formidable task is the resumption of South–North reconciliation. Despite Pyongyang's numerous provocations, she has kept open the door to dialogue.²⁶ Her campaign resembles Kim Dae-jung's in that her first step was to rally international support for her strategy while maintaining a resolute military deterrence posture. Kim Dae-jung rallied superpower support with visits to Washington, Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow. Ultimately, Pyongyang felt compelled to work with him. Just as Pyongyang sought to provoke Park in the spring of 2013, Pyongyang tested Kim's commitment to reconciliation with hostile rhetoric and armed attacks on South Korean naval vessels in the Yellow Sea. Kim responded in kind but always followed quickly with offers to engage in dialogue and negotiation.

From May 7–9, 2013, Park launched her campaign to rally international support with a successful visit to Washington, DC, where President Barack Obama praised her, voicing full support for her "trustpolitik" and a negotiated end to North Korea's nuclear program. She also addressed a joint session of the US Congress, an honor extended to select East Asian leaders and only once in 2015 to Japan's prime minister.²⁷ She continued her successful

26. Quinones, "March Madness," p. 206; Lee Kwang-ho, "Pyongyang's Gesture for Inter-Korean Dialogue," *Vantage Point* 36:8 (August 2013), pp. 4–9; Kim Tae-shik, "Consistent Position in Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation," *Vantage Point* 36:9 (September 2013), pp. 10–13.

27. "Remarks by President Obama and President Park of South Korea in a Joint Press Conference," May 7, 2013 <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/07/remarks-president-obama-and-president-park-south-korea-joint-press-confe>>.

international diplomacy with a visit to Beijing, June 27–30. China's highest leaders welcomed her and avowed support for “trustpolitik” and for the goal of dismantling North Korea's nuclear weapons program.²⁸ Park and Chinese President Xi Jinping have met five times, including Xi's July 3–4, 2014, visit to Seoul. Russian President Vladimir Putin received Park at the August 2013 G-20 meeting in St. Petersburg and followed with a 2014 visit to Seoul. Park has also had summits with the leaders of France, the UK, and Belgium, and with leaders in the Middle East and South Asia. Park's successful summits have confirmed international support for her strategy and the shared goal of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.

Beijing's discomfort with Pyongyang has become increasingly apparent since Pyongyang's third nuclear test on January 12, 2013. After Xi hosted Park in Beijing, China announced that it would finally enforce the UNSC sanctions imposed on North Korea. In May Beijing summoned Kim Jong-un's close adviser Choe Ryong Hae and chief negotiator to the Six-Party Talks, Kim Gye Kwan, to Beijing, possibly to admonish Pyongyang for its reluctance to return to the talks.²⁹ Beijing blocked transactions with North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank and halted crude-oil aid to Pyongyang (China provided the DPRK 523,041 metric tons of crude oil in 2012), compelling Pyongyang to purchase 500,000 metric tons of crude from Iran,³⁰ but Beijing later blocked the Iranian shipment. As of mid-2015, Beijing has not included in its trade statistics the amount and/or value of crude oil exports to North Korea.

28. Lee Kwang-ho, “S. Korea-China Agreement for Nuke-free Korean Peninsula,” *Vantage Point* 36:7 (July 2013), pp. 4–10. “Korean Peninsula Situation to Be Discussed during ROK President's China Visit: Spokeswoman,” *Xinhua*, June 26, 2013 <http://www.news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-06/26/c_132489416.htm>; “Chinese, ROK Presidents Hold Talks, Pledge All-Round Cooperation,” *Xinhua News*, June 27, 2013 <http://www.news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-06/27/c_132492654.htm>.

29. “Chinese President Xi Jinping Meets Choe Ryong Hae,” *Xinhua*, May 23, 2013 <http://www.news.xinhua.com/english/china2013-05/23/c_132404237.htm>; “President Xi Reaffirms Denuclearization on Korean Peninsula,” *Xinhua*, May 24, 2013 <http://www.news.xinhua.com/english/china2013-05/24/c_132406676.htm>.

30. “Bank of China Cuts Ties with N. Korea Bank,” *Chosun Ilbo*, May 8, 2013 <http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/05/08/2013050800571.html>; “China Exports to N. Korea Fall,” *Chosun Ilbo*, July 31, 2013 <http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/07/31/2013073100837.html>; “China Restricts Trade with N. Korea,” *Chosun Ilbo*, September 24, 2013 <http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/09/24/2013092401293.html>; “China Holds up Iranian Oil Shipment to N. Korea,” *Chosun Ilbo*, October 21, 2013 <http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/10/21/2013102101248.html>; “China Still Sitting on Oil Shipments to N. Korea,” *Chosun Ilbo*, May 26, 2014 <http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/05/26/2014052601515/html>.

As for DPRK–China trade, it reached USD 6.36 billion in 2014. This is a 2.8% decline from 2013. Between January and March 2013, DPRK–China trade had declined by more than 7%. In 2014, North Korea’s main exports to China, coal and iron ore, declined 17.7% and 25.7% respectively. Yet DPRK–China bilateral trade accounted for 89.1% of the North’s total 2014 international trade.³¹ China’s economic slowdown, more than bilateral political friction, probably accounts for this changing trade pattern. Nevertheless, DPRK–China political relations remain strained, as reflected by the absence of any significant bilateral meetings since DPRK Foreign Minister Pak Ui Chun met PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing on July 1, 2013.³² Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un awaits his first invitation to visit Beijing and, surprisingly, declined an invitation to visit Moscow, but it was not for a state visit.

Park’s “trustpolitik” avoids mention of coercive tactics such as UN sanctions. Instead, she accents positive *quid pro quo* steps that reflect and match North Korea’s conduct, an approach Pyongyang has favored since its nuclear negotiations with the US in the early 1990s. Park emphasizes such multilateral negotiations as the Six-Party Talks. She also talks of including rather than excluding Pyongyang in multilateral economic projects such as reconnecting Korea’s rail network to the Trans-Siberian and Trans-China Railroads, and working with China and Russia to promote regional trade while facilitating the flow of Russian oil and gas to Northeast Asia.

The first indication that Pyongyang might eventually respond positively to Park’s “trustpolitik” strategy came early in July 2013, after Park’s repeated offers to convene discussions on the KIZ. This project is the cornerstone of reconciliation and was a central element of the 2000 South–North summit. Resumption of the KIZ’s operation was agreed to on August 14, 2013, and normal operation was restored on September 16.³³ Located 70 kilometers north of Seoul and 160 kilometers south of Pyongyang, near the DPRK city of Kaesong, headquarters for KPA forces deployed along the DMZ, the 6,500-acre area began operation in 2004 and has steadily grown in size and

31. Lee Jong-kyu, “N. Korea’s Foreign Trade in the Kim Jong-un Era,” *Vantage Point* 38:8 (August 2015), pp. 14–17.

32. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, DPRK Activities <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjib_663304/yzs_663350/8jib_663354/2701_6634064>.

33. Kim Tae-shik, “Consistent Position in Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation,” *Vantage Point* 36:9 (September 2013), pp. 10–13.

production. As of early 2013 it housed the office and factory buildings of 123 South Korean small and medium-size firms, employing 53,448 North Korean workers.

The total monthly cost per worker is USD 129, of which USD 80 is for basic wage plus overtime pay, meals, transportation, insurance, and other benefits. This is significantly below the average cost per worker in China's Shandong and Vietnam's Hanoi special development zones. In 2012 the KIZ produced USD 469.5 million's worth of goods and accounted for 99.5% of South–North Korea trade. Products are labeled “Made in North Korea,” so they cannot be exported to Japan and face very high duties if exported to the US. Obviously, the KIZ benefits both Koreas in several ways.³⁴ South Korea's small-and-medium-business sector had faced huge losses if the zone remained closed. For Park, reopening the KIZ was politically significant for her stature in the eyes of South Korea's business community and the pursuit of reconciliation. North Korea also restored the South–North military hotline, which had been disconnected in March 2013.

But Pyongyang's attitude toward Park turned nasty again in October 2013. On October 4, the NDC accused her of having “malignantly slandered the dignity and social system in the DPRK.” Apparently, what sparked this and similar subsequent outbursts was Park's repeated urging that the DPRK give up its nuclear ambitions. The NDC demanded that “Park and her group should not try to lead the DPRK to change and force it to dismantle nuclear weapons.” It concluded that the DPRK's nuclear weapons are “a powerful deterrent to deter the nuclear war disaster to be inflicted by the US.”³⁵ The DPRK repeated similar allegations on October 14, 2013. Pyongyang's mass media continued to verbally assault Park well into November, warning that “they [the ROK administration] should not dare utter words about the nukes of the DPRK” and proclaiming that “Park should know that genuine confidence can be built only when she respects all the North-South joint declarations and agreements,” a reference to the June 2000 and October 2007 joint agreements.

34. Yang Moon-soo, “Kaesong Industrial Complex as Key to Peace on Korean Peninsula,” *Korea Focus*, September 2013 <http://www.koreafocus.or.kr/design3/essays/view.asp?volume_id=142&content_id=104914&category=G>.

35. “N. Korea Vows Not to Give Up Nuclear Weapons under U.S. Pressure,” *Vantage Point* 36:11 (November 2013), pp. 43–44.

The December 12, 2013 execution for subversion of Jang Sung-taek, NDC vice chairman, key link to Chinese investors and spouse of Kim Jong-un's father's sister, distracted Pyongyang's leaders.³⁶ One concern in Seoul was that this once-powerful, rich in-law of Kim Jong-il—and the uncle by marriage of Kim *filis*—had been involved with South Korean agents. At least three times since 1996, South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) had successfully used money and other enticements to gain access to ranking DPRK officials, including top-ranked KWP official Hwang Chang-yop. If the NIS had had any involvement with Jang, this would have seriously undermined prospects for reconciliation. But the rumors of his involvement have apparently proven false.

After the political atmosphere had stabilized in Pyongyang in 2014, Kim Jong-un refocused on other priorities, including reconciliation. Pyongyang surprised Seoul by dispatching a high-level delegation to the closing ceremony for the October 2014 Asian Games in Incheon. The delegation included: NDC Vice Chairman General Hwang Pyong-so, KWP Secretary Choe Ryong-hae, and KWP United Front Department Director Kim Yang-gon. Seoul responded by inviting Pyongyang to high-level talks, but the invitation was shelved when tensions abruptly intensified after the two Koreas exchanged naval gunfire in the Yellow Sea.³⁷ Despite lingering tensions, the two sides continued to seek common ground.

On February 12, 2015, the long awaited meeting of ranking South-North officials convened. The talks proved inconclusive except for Kim's acceptance of Park's offer to hold another reunion of family members separated by the DMZ since the Korean War. The reunion convened on February 20, 2015, the first since 2012. Then on August 5 former first lady Lee Hee-ho, the wife of Kim Dae-jung, who in 2000 was the first ROK president to visit North Korea, flew from Seoul to Pyongyang to meet Kim Jong-un. Park approved the visit apparently in the hope that it might promote further South-North

36. Jang Song-taek's power was believed to be second only to that of Kim Jong-un. Kim Jong-un apparently executed Jang to assert and to consolidate his authority. Lee Kwang-ho, "Brutal Execution of Jang Song-thaek and Aftermath," *Vantage Point* 37:1 (January 2014), pp. 2–11.

37. "N. Korean Press Low-Key in Reporting Visit to S. Korea," *Chosun Ilbo*, October 7, 2014 <http://english.Chosun.com./site/data/html_dir/2014/10/07/201400701129.html>; "Two Koreas Exchange Fire at Sea," *Chosun Ilbo*, October 8, 2014 <http://english.Chosun.com./site/data/html_dir/2014/10/08/2014100800953.html>.

cooperation. Relative to the prolonged tensions of early 2013, this was a significant, but still very tentative improvement in bilateral relations.

CONCLUSION

Park Geun-hye's pursuit of the "trustpolitik" strategy, supported by broadened domestic and international support, could eventually restart reconciliation. Domestic support for her approach was evident in a September 12, 2013, TNS Monthly Omnibus Poll, a survey of 1,000 South Korean adults in Seoul by the international marketing firm TNS Korea.³⁸ In this poll, 64% of respondents believed that Park would improve relations with North Korea during her term, regardless of their party affiliation and whether they approve of her as president. Another 30% believed that the relationship would remain unchanged; only 4% believed that it would not improve.

Formidable impediments remain before sustained reconciliation can resume. Obviously, the nuclear issue is foremost. Park insists that Kim Jong-un must discard his nuclear ambitions before reconciliation can proceed. Kim insists that his nuclear program is not open for negotiation and remains vital for deterring the perceived threat of a US "preemptive" nuclear attack. At a minimum, Park's efforts have reduced tensions on the Korean Peninsula compared to the situation prior to her inauguration. With the help of Moscow and Beijing, she also appears to have convinced Kim to at least temporarily shelve his provocative rhetoric and actions, and instead consider joining the pursuit of reconciliation.

If Kim eventually deems reconciliation a top priority, he must first rally and sustain his advisers' support. Now that the December 2013 trial and execution of Jang Sung-taek is history, Kim's advisers can be less concerned about consolidating his authority. Kim can rally support for reconciliation by asserting that it would better enable him to achieve his primary goals of building a prosperous and strong nation. But the lack of support among his advisers could quickly undermine any steps toward reconciliation. The international community's preference for reconciliation, particularly in Beijing and Moscow, could further reinforce Pyongyang's commitment. Internationally, Kim knows

38. *TNS Perspectives* (Seoul) no. 6, September, 12, 2013 <<http://www.jinwoo.chung@tnsglobal.com>>.

that he lags far behind Park in terms of international respect. His participation in reconciliation could help reverse this.

Clearly, Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program and Seoul's precondition that it be discarded are the foremost impediments to reconciliation's resumption. Given the two sides' adamancy it would seem impossible to dismantle these hurdles. However, this was previously accomplished by recasting the nuclear issue as one to be resolved by the international community, i.e. the Six-Party Talks. Certainly the US, China, and Russia, despite their shared resolve to see Pyongyang discard its nuclear weapons program, prefer that South–North reconciliation resume, since this would reduce tensions on the peninsula. Reconciliation could also reduce Pyongyang's paranoia toward the US and convince it to resume negotiations on its nuclear weapons program. But before this could happen, Pyongyang most likely would demand the end of UN sanctions, a matter the international community and not the two Koreas would have to address.

It is up to Park Geun-hye and Kim Jong-un to forge a compromise. For Park this is more problematic: she must convince the South Korean public that deferring resolution of the nuclear issue is in the national interest since it would allow reconciliation to restart. This is certain to be a daunting task, but the stronger her domestic support, the better the prospects for success. Ultimately, Park alone cannot resume and sustain progress toward reconciliation. It will require substantial domestic political support and her North Korean counterpart's cooperation. President Park, having put the ball in Kim Jong-un's court, has unwittingly given him the initiative. Further progress now depends on Kim's willingness to continue responding constructively to her overtures.