

To Be or Not To Be: South Korea's East Asia Security Strategy and the Unification Quandary

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Since its division following independence from Japanese colonialism in 1945, the reunification of the Korean peninsula has been the ultimate national mission for the Republic of South Korea (ROK). Unification became the most important redemptive mission for Koreans to recover the national pride and unity lost during Japanese colonialism. Yet, it also became a practical imperative to address the most serious national security threat posed by North Korean military aggression. Memories are still vivid of the Korean War which North Korea's Communist leader, Kim Il-sung, started in 1950 in an effort to unify Korea by force, and which killed almost four million Koreans on both sides (since the 1953 armistice, the two Koreas have remained technically at war). Additionally, unification is understood as a way to enhance Korea's geostrategic leverage over its big neighbours, China and Japan, which seem to have taken advantage of the division. In fact, the Chinese and Japanese views on Korean unification can be likened to the way former French President Mitterrand spoke of the prospects of German unification: they like Korea so much that they prefer to have two of them as their neighbours rather than just one. Koreans had every reason to believe that reunification was their national mission and in Korea's interests. Indeed, as much as the South Koreans feared military aggression from the North, they also wanted to achieve unification badly enough to risk war, causing the United States to keep a close eye on each South Korean government throughout the Cold War for any intent to launch a pre-emptive attack on North Korea.¹

Coming into the 1990s, however, South Korea seemed to be increasingly indifferent to, if not downright against, the idea of unifying the two Koreas. As the two societies grew apart over the past few decades, South Koreans have come to see

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¹For detailed accounts of US-ROK tensions over South Korea's unification policy during the Cold War, see Chae-Jin, *A Troubled Peace: US Policy and the Two Koreas*, Ch. 3.

North Koreans as impoverished people in a different nation. As the old generation dies out, the sense of brotherhood is being replaced by a weary sentiment regarding North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship and human rights abuses. Having watched the great hope and excitement of German unification result in economic downturn and social conflicts, more South Koreans have become sceptical of unification's benefits. A pragmatic approach has replaced the old nationalistic fever of Korean unity. Today's South Koreans opt for peaceful coexistence and gradual integration with the North. The irony is that while unification seemed so impossible when Koreans longed for it half a century ago, unification may well be a practical issue that South Koreans will have to deal with in the near future given the numerous reports lately of Kim Jong-il's ailing health.

This article will discuss South Korea's security strategy in Northeast Asia under the current Lee Myong-bak government which was voted into power in February 2008. After examining fundamental changes in South Korea's security outlook since the end of the Cold War, it will introduce the three pillars of the Lee government's new strategic thinking: a 'strategic alliance' with the US; a 'strategic cooperative partnership' with China; and a new emphasis on multilateral security mechanisms in Northeast Asia. Finally, it will discuss how this new strategic thinking addresses the question of Korean unification amidst speculation about Kim Jong-il's latest health problems and possible regime change in North Korea.

South Korea's security strategy in Northeast Asia

A new security environment and new strategic thinking

Since the Korean War, South Korea's national security strategy has focused on two objectives: deterring a North Korean attack, and keeping a strong military alliance with the United States. Throughout the Cold War, North Korea, a totalitarian regime supported by over a million troops, was South Korea's main source of threat, and thus public enemy no. 1. Indeed, North Korea launched numerous military provocations, including commando attacks on the Presidential House in the 1960s, the axe murder of two US officers in the 1970s, a terrorist bombing of a Korean Air flight and an assassination attempt of President Chun Doo-Hwan in the 1980s – each case almost leading to war. Even after the Cold War, the nations' navies engaged in sea battles in 1998 and 2002. Deterring a North Korean military attack has been the South's most important national security objective. To achieve this, South Korea has relied on keeping a strong military alliance with the United States, the alliance being the number one pillar of Seoul's security strategy. The alliance with the United States was understood as a critical component of South Korean economic and political development as well as national defence.

With the end of the Cold War, South Korea's security environment has gone through significant changes. First of all, North Korea's military threat does not

seem as serious and direct as before.² Despite the North's strength in numbers, the gap between the two Koreas in defence spending has been widening. According to various estimates, North Korea's defence budget for the last ten years has stayed consistently within the range of US\$ 2 to 5 billion. Meanwhile, with its continuing economic growth, South Korea's defence budget increased steadily from US\$ 15 to 25 billion over the same period.³ Second, thanks to growing confidence, South Korea has intensively sought to improve its relations with its impoverished northern brother, culminating in the historical first summit between the two leaders in 2000.⁴ Third, South Korea's growing economic ties with China have led to a new partnership with Beijing, whose increasing influence over the South Korean economy and security has raised serious concern in Washington.⁵ Fourth, the US, in the midst of its war on terrorism, has become less enthusiastic about its military commitment to South Korea's defence.⁶ The George W. Bush administration initiated the restructuring of the US military presence in South Korea with the consolidation of bases, reduction of ground troops from 37,500 to 28,500, and transfer of Wartime Operation Control to the ROK military by 2012.

These changes have led to a new strategic thinking in South Korea. The possible collapse of North Korea is now perceived as a greater threat than a possible military attack.⁷ South Korea finds itself caught simultaneously in the growing rivalry between China and the United States, as it pursues increasing partnership with Beijing while trying to maintain its alliance with the United States. Seen as a hedging strategy by some,⁸ the dilemma was never so clear as when the Lee Myong-bak government announced a 'strategic cooperative partnership' with China one month after it had committed itself to upgrading the ROK-US alliance to a 'strategic alliance' for the 21st century.⁹ To mitigate US and Chinese suspicions

²There is a serious division in South Korea today over North Korea policy. The younger generation tends to see North Korea as the object of South Korean sympathy and aid, while the older generation still considers North Korea as a serious threat. Hahm, "The Two South Koreas: A House Divided", 57–72.

³Estimates from *The Military Balance* 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, *SIPRI Yearbook* 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, and CIA World Fact Book. <https://www.cia.gov/search?NS-collection=Factbook>

⁴Sheen, "US Strategy of Engagement".

⁵Snyder, "South Korea's Squeeze Play", 93–106; Goldstein, "The Future of US-China Relations and the Korean Peninsula", 111–29.

⁶Bandow, "Seoul Searching: Ending the U.S.-Korean Alliance", 111–16; Levin, *The U.S.-ROK Security Relationship After 9/11*.

⁷Victor Cha recalls that during his meeting with special envoys of the Roh government in 2003, when pressed to state whether a nuclear North Korea was worse than collapse of the regime, those representatives clearly prioritized avoiding collapse even at the expense of the proliferation issue. Cha, "South Korea: Anchored or Adrift?", 116.

⁸Chung, *Between Ally and Partner*, 1–18.

⁹On 28 May 2008, President Lee Myong-bak and President Hu Jintao agreed to upgrade the Korea-China relationship from the existing 'comprehensive cooperative partnership' to a 'strategic cooperative partnership' and to further strengthen people-to-people exchanges and cooperation in all areas including diplomacy, security, economy, society and culture. South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Korea-China Joint Statement", Beijing, 28 May 2008. <http://www.mofat.go.kr/state/areadiplomacy/asiapacific/index.jsp>

of a South Korean double stance, South Korea has put new emphasis on a multi-lateral security mechanism in the region. As a result, South Korea's new security strategy in East Asia rests on three pillars: upgrading the alliance with the US, increasing security cooperation with China, and putting renewed emphasis on a multilateral security mechanism.

A 'strategic alliance' with the United States

Restoring trust in Washington

The first pillar of the Lee government's new security policy is the 'strategic alliance' with the US. During his first state visit to Washington DC in April 2008, President Lee declared that South Korea will promote the 'strategic alliance' with the United States to meet the security challenges of the 21st century.¹⁰ It was the first time that the South Korean government used the term 'strategic alliance' to define relations with the United States. Lee's desire to upgrade the nature and mission of the alliance to a new level has two objectives. One is to mend the damage wrought on the bilateral relationship under the previous Roh Moo-hyun administration. As a conservative party candidate during the presidential election in 2007, Lee criticised the progressive Roh administration for poor, if not antagonistic, management of bilateral relations with the United States. He argued that Roh's pro-North Korea policy and disagreement over North Korea's nuclear problem weakened the traditional alliance partnership with the United States.

Once elected, Lee promised that recovering the ROK-US alliance would be at the top of his agenda. His prompt visit to Washington two months after his inauguration – indeed his very first foreign visit as president – was a display of Lee's good will towards South Korea's longtime ally. With the words, "friendship based on a helping hand when needed most", he emphasized that today's Korea would not exist had it not been for the sacrifice of US soldiers during the Korean War.¹¹ Lee subsequently became the first Korean president to be invited to Camp David for a friendly summit meeting with President Bush. He agreed to reopen the Korean market for US beef exports, which had been banned since 2003 after the Mad Cow outbreak. Indeed, Lee later paid a big political price when he faced angry mass protests in Korea, which almost paralysed his presidency and government.¹² President Bush thanked Lee for lifting the beef sanctions and promised to upgrade

¹⁰President Lee Myong-bak, "Speech at the Korea Society Dinner in New York (in Korean)", New York, 15 April 2008. <http://www.mofat.go.kr/state/areadiplomacy/northamerica/index2.jsp?TabMenu=TabMenu2>

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²After months of mass protests in downtown Seoul criticizing his policy, Lee replaced his top advisors and issued a public apology. *Guardian*, 25 June 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jun/25/korea.usa>

South Korea's right to buy US high-tech weapons to the same level as NATO members.¹³ By the end of 2008, South Korea was also included in the US visa waiver program (VWP), another significant breakthrough in bilateral relations.

Korea's desire to become a global player

The other objective of Lee's 'strategic alliance' with the US is to change the focus of the alliance from regional to global, expanding the alliance mission to promoting regional and global peace. Lee argues that the alliance should be upgraded to meet the challenges of the 21st century security environment. While the alliance was originally based on the North Korean military threat, the basis of this new 'strategic alliance' will be common values, mutual trust and building peace. According to Lee, the two countries share a liberal democracy and market economy as common values after South Korea's success in economic development and democratic transition. This makes it possible for them to forge a lasting alliance relationship even if North Korea's military threat were to disappear in the future. The ROK-US military alliance could contribute to regional peace in Northeast Asia beyond the Korean Peninsula in the fields of international peace-building and in the fight against terrorism, poverty, diseases and environmental degradation.¹⁴

As such, Lee's vision for 'strategic alliance' represents a bold departure from South Korea's past security strategy. While defence against North Korean attack was the one and only objective of the alliance during the Cold War, the new kind of alliance envisaged and the underlying security strategy strive to be more pro-active. The alliance's new role of promoting regional and world peace beyond the Korean peninsula, in particular South Korea's active participation in building international peace, is also a more ambitious undertaking than the Northeast Asian balancer role suggested by the previous Roh Moo-hyun administration.

Notwithstanding the changing security environment and South Korea's growing confidence in its superiority over North Korea's obsolete military force, it is not clear whether South Korea is ready to take on an active military role for regional and global peace alongside the United States. If, with his 'strategic alliance', Lee envisioned South Korea as the United Kingdom of Asia in the US alliance system, South Korea will have to enhance its military commitment to US global initiatives. That means sending combat troops to places like Iraq and Afghanistan as an active partner in the US global war on terrorism.

However, it is unlikely that South Korea is ready to take on such a mission around the globe. By the end of 2008, South Korea had completed withdrawal of the 3,600 troops dispatched for a reconstruction mission in Iraq. A year earlier, South Korea

¹³South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Press Briefing by President George Bush" (in Korean), Seoul, 20 April 2008. <http://www.mofat.go.kr/state/areadiplomacy/northamerica/index.jsp>

¹⁴President Lee, "Speech at the Korea Society Dinner in New York" (in Korean), New York, 15 April 2008.

had already completed the withdrawal of its medical units from Afghanistan. When the outgoing Bush administration asked for more troops to be dispatched to Afghanistan, only 32 percent of the Korean public supported the idea, while 49 percent said they are against it.¹⁵ More recently, when asked about alliance management with the new Obama administration and a possible US request for military assistance in Afghanistan, a government official denied any plan to send troops to Afghanistan again.¹⁶ Given the low domestic support (around 30 percent¹⁷), and the looming economic crisis, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, for the Lee government to send troops abroad to support the US war on terrorism.

A 'strategic cooperative partnership' with China

From 'comprehensive' to 'strategic' partner

The second pillar of the Lee government's new security policy is South Korea's 'strategic cooperative partnership' with China, reflecting the increasing importance of China's role in South Korea's security – and economic interests. It is no secret that China has replaced the US as South Korea's largest trading partner since 2003, when South Korea totalled a more than \$13 billion trade surplus with China, compared to the little over \$9 billion surplus with the US. In 2008, South Korea's total trade volume with China grew to \$178 billion, more than twice the size of trade with the US at \$85 billion.¹⁸ It is likely that this trend will continue unless the Chinese economy stops growing. It is well understood that South Korea has to have a close 'cooperative partnership' with China in the economic field. Indeed, the previous Roh government defined bilateral ties with Beijing as a 'comprehensive cooperative partnership'.¹⁹ By replacing 'comprehensive' with 'strategic', the Lee government claims to have upgraded the bilateral tie to a new level. The question is: what is South Korea trying to do with this 'strategic partnership'? Does it want to develop a new military partnership or does it simply want to put more emphasis on South Korea's appreciation of bilateral relations, as the word 'strategic' is often used rhetorically to imply 'importance'?

Despite rapidly growing ties between South Korea and China in socio-politics and culture as well as economics, it is premature to expect the two former enemies during the Korean War to forge a military partnership. In their joint statement after the May 2008 summit, the two nations' leaders agreed to establish a mechanism for strategic dialogue to increase bilateral cooperation in the diplomatic and security fields. Yet the strategic dialogue only included high-level diplomatic authorities,

¹⁵*KyungHyang Shinmun*, 8 August 2008.

¹⁶*Chosun Ilbo*, 9 January 2009.

¹⁷*Chosun Ilbo*, 25 February 2009; *Kookmin Ilbo*, 24 February 2009.

¹⁸"South Korea's Country Statistics", Korea International Trade Association. <http://www.kita.org>

¹⁹Chung, *Between Ally and Partner*, 1–29.

and ultimately was not meant to be a military one.²⁰ Indeed, the joint statement did not mention any military exchange, while it promised to expand existing economic ties, along with people-to-people and cultural exchanges. Later in August 2008, when President Hu Jintao paid a visit to Seoul, the two leaders agreed to promote high-level exchanges between the defence authorities in addition to more strategic dialogue between the two foreign ministers.²¹ However, it was still not clear what specific level of military exchanges the countries would promote, and in what fields. For one thing, China remains the most important military ally and advocate of North Korea, which is technically still at war with South Korea. It will take fundamental change in the Beijing-Pyongyang relationship as well as in the Beijing-Seoul one before the latter two parties can build any meaningful military ties.

Working together on North Korea, but not yet military partners

At the same time, Lee's 'strategic partnership' initiative reflects the reality that China has become a key component of South Korea's security interest. In particular, China's role and interest in solving the North Korean nuclear issue has been keenly appreciated by Seoul.²² Since August 2003, China has hosted rounds of the Six-Party Talks²³ in Beijing and played the role of mediator between the US and North Korea. China remains the only ally of impoverished North Korea which largely depends on China for its food and energy supply. But more importantly, Beijing and Seoul seem to share the same priority in preventing any military confrontation between North Korea and the United States. Under the Roh government, South Korea's emphasis on peaceful resolution through dialogue often collided with that of Washington, which wanted to put more pressure on North Korea for its nuclear defiance. In their 2008 summit, Lee and Hu Jintao once again agreed to cooperate closely in solving North Korea's nuclear problem in a peaceful manner through the Six-Party Talks.

Despite the rhetoric of the new 'strategic partnership', Lee's call for upgrading bilateral ties was not well received in Beijing. While welcoming Lee's initiative towards China, it expressed strong concern over his drive to strengthen the ROK-US alliance. During Lee's visit to Beijing, a spokesperson from the Chinese Foreign Ministry denounced the move as a military alliance reminiscent of the Cold War, saying

²⁰"Korea-China Joint Statement", Beijing, 28 May 2008. <http://www.mofat.go.kr/state/areadiplomacy/asiapacific/index.jsp>

²¹South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Korea-China Joint Statement", Seoul, 25 August 2008. <http://www.mofat.go.kr/state/areadiplomacy/asiapacific/index.jsp>

²²Chung, *Between Ally and Partner*, 86–90.

²³A multilateral negotiation process involving the US, China, Japan, Russia and the two Koreas.

The US-ROK military alliance is something leftover from history. As we all know, times have changed, and so have situations in all of the countries in this region. The Cold War framework of a “military alliance” would not be valid in viewing, measuring and handling the current global or regional security issues.²⁴

It remains to be seen whether and how the Lee government can gain enough trust from its partner in Beijing for South Korea’s alliance with the US not to be seen as a threat to China’s security interests.²⁵

A multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia

A supplement to Korea’s bilateral alliance with the US

Building a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia may provide a solution to South Korea’s strategic quandary of managing relations with both the US and China. Lee’s ‘strategic alliance’ represents his desire to put the ROK-US alliance back on track as the most important security pillar of South Korea’s traditional East Asia strategy. And the ‘strategic cooperative partnership’ with China reflects the reality of Seoul’s increasing need to consult closely with Beijing on security matters such as North Korea’s nuclear issue. The problem, however, is that Seoul can be seen as playing Washington and Beijing off against each other. The response to this suspicion comes from the third pillar of South Korea’s East Asia strategy: renewed emphasis on multilateralism in Northeast Asia. With its security interests diversifying to cope with the major power rivalry in Northeast Asia, the tightening of energy competition and the worsening of environmental problems, as well as with the North Korean threat, a multilateral security mechanism is seen as a useful supplement to Korea’s traditional bilateral military alliance with the United States.

There had already been talks of developing a new security mechanism in the region before Lee came to power. Former President Roh emphasized the importance of creating “a regional community of peace and prosperity” in Northeast Asia.²⁶ And the 19 September 2005 Joint Statement issued by the Six-Party Talks mentioned establishing a Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism (NEAPSM).²⁷ A working group on NEAPSM was established by the 13

²⁴*English Hankyoreh*, 29 May 2008. http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/290352.html

²⁵A study by the Samsung Economic Research Institute (SERI) found that a majority of South Koreans still think that the ROK-US alliance should continue even after Korean unification. Oh, *Hanmidongmaengui miraewa hankukui suntaek* [The Future of ROK-US Alliance and Korea’s Choice], 276–9.

²⁶Roh, “On History, Nationalism and a Northeast Asian Community”.

²⁷According to Article 4 of the Joint Statement, the parties “committed to joint efforts for lasting peace and stability in Northeast Asia” and also “agreed to explore ways and means for promoting security cooperation in Northeast Asia”. US Department of State, “Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks”, Beijing, 19 September 2005. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/53490.htm>

February 2007 Initial Actions Agreement. During the latest Six-Party Talks held in December 2008, Russia, chairing the Working Group, distributed the draft of Guiding Principles on Peace and Security in Northeast Asia, and received positive reactions from all parties.²⁸

The Lee government has also underlined the importance of the multilateral security mechanism. In state visits to Washington, Tokyo, Beijing and Moscow, Lee advocated that South Korea and its partner countries promote a multilateral mechanism in dealing with security as well as other issues. South Korea's emphasis on multilateralism not only calls for more active participation in existing mechanisms such as ASEAN+3,²⁹ the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit, and APEC,³⁰ but also eventually the creation of a Northeast Asian mechanism in which all the major parties, such as Japan and Russia as well as the US and China, share the common security interest with Korea of building a peace.

Korea's 'global network diplomacy'

It is interesting to note that both the former progressive Roh government and the current conservative Lee government share the same interest in a multilateral security mechanism. South Korea's emphasis on multilateralism in Northeast Asia reflects its ambition and need to diversify its security network with all parties in the region to mitigate its strategic dilemma of choosing sides between the US and China. In addition, South Korea hopes to balance regional diplomacy, increasingly dominated by the Washington-Beijing axis. Indeed, Lee's first year shuttle diplomacy paid attention to mending relations with Japan and forging a new partnership with Russia.

Korea-Japan relations had suffered serious setbacks under the previous Roh administration due to controversies over history textbooks, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, and territorial claims over the disputed Tokdo/Takeshima Island. With the transition in 2008 to the more pragmatic government under Yasuo Fukuda, the two governments resumed shuttle diplomacy between Seoul and Tokyo and tried to normalise bilateral relations. Lee's participation in the first ever Japan-China-Korea trilateral summit in Fukuoka in December 2008, hosted by the newly appointed Japanese Prime

²⁸“Chairman's Statement of the Six-Party Talks”, *China View*, 11 December 2008. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-12/11/content_10491337.htm

²⁹For participants of these forums, see the article by Ayson in this issue, fn 23, 33.

³⁰Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), established in 1989, is a forum for facilitating economic growth, cooperation, trade and investment in the Asia-Pacific region. APEC now has 21 members, which account for approximately 41% of the world's population, approximately 55% of world GDP and about 49% of world trade.

Minister Aso Taro, also signaled the South Korean government's good will towards Japan's diplomatic initiative.³¹

As for Russia, South Korea has labelled bilateral relations with Russia as a 'strategic cooperative partnership', the same term used for China. Indeed, in addition to appreciating Russia's efforts as the chair of the NEAPSM Working Group in September 2008,³² the Lee government has shown much interest in Russia's vast energy resources. Given its strong dependence on energy imports, South Korea proposed energy cooperation involving imports of 7.5 million tons of Russian natural gas (20 percent of South Korea's annual consumption) from Siberia every year.

Lee claims that his active shuttle diplomacy with four major countries – the US, China, Russia and Japan – has upgraded South Korea's bilateral relations with each of them and provided the basis for Korea's 'global network diplomacy' to promote peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. He also claims that these upgrades do not work against each other.³³ As such, South Korea eventually hopes to develop a regional multilateral mechanism that can provide a venue in which South Korea and other countries in the region can take advantage of positive-sum dynamics. Yet, for such a multilateral initiative to be implemented, it has to be endorsed by the most important stakeholders in the region: the US and China. The new US government has expressed interest in "forging a more effective framework in Asia that goes beyond bilateral agreements, occasional summits, and *ad hoc* arrangements, such as the Six-Party Talks on North Korea".³⁴ Yet, as always, the devil's in the details. And no one, including South Korea, has yet come up with a concrete plan for how, where, when and on what issues to start building the mechanism.

South Korea's ambivalence on unification

Uncertainty in North Korea: is Kim Jong-il all right?

While South Korea's Lee government is busy engaging in shuttle diplomacy with its neighbours, North Korea's Kim Jong-il regime looks increasingly vulnerable.

³¹The three leaders, President Lee, Prime Minister Wen Jabao, and Prime Minister Aso Taro, agreed to make a joint effort to boost the regional economy during the world financial crisis. They also agreed to have regular meetings on a trilateral basis in the future. South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Han-jung-il jungsang hoidam kyulkwa" [Outcome of the Korea-China-Japan Summit], 13 December 2008. <http://www.mofat.go.kr/state/areadiplomacy/asiapacific/index2.jsp?TabMenu=TabMenu2>

³²South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Statement of ROK-Russia Summit", Moscow, 29 September 2008. <http://www.mofat.go.kr/state/areadiplomacy/europe/index.jsp>

³³South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Lee Myung-bak jungbu joobyon 4kuk oykyo sungkwa* [Lee government's diplomatic achievement with four neighboring countries], December 2008.

³⁴Obama, "Renewing American Leadership", 12.

There were numerous reports on the leader's ill health following his absence on 9 September from the 60th anniversary parade of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Western media and Japanese news agencies reported that Kim Jong-il had suffered a stroke in August 2008. Though the South Korean government downplayed speculation on Kim's illness, there is growing concern over Kim and his regime's future.³⁵

Kim Jong-il, heir to his father, Kim Il-sung, who died in 1994, is regarded as the absolute leader of North Korea. His demise would cause serious uncertainty about the future direction of North Korea. No one has a clear idea of how the succession process will play out. It will be an enormous challenge for any successor to manage the ever-weakening North Korean regime. It is doubtful that any of Kim Jong-il's three sons have the experience, determination and political clout of their father or grandfather to tackle the ever-worsening economic and political conditions of the highly isolated regime. Some say other family members, such as Chang Sung-taek, Kim's brother-in-law, could emerge as the leader.³⁶ With no prominent figure to succeed Kim Jong-il, it is possible that a group of elders or members of the Communist Party elite and military will assume collective leadership. In any case, North Korea could well go through a period of great upheaval and uncertainty during any power struggle among the regime's factions.³⁷

All concerned parties, including Washington and Seoul, wish for a stable power transition (the so-called soft landing) and the emergence of a moderate and reform-minded leadership. The best-case scenario would be if some moderate reform faction or figure were to take control and engage with the outside world after giving up the nuclear program. However, the situation seems to be too volatile for such a happy ending; it could well be a hard landing with a chaotic regime collapse. North Korea's power transition would then present a serious challenge for South Korea and its neighbours. They must be able to manage it in a manner that does not disrupt the delicate power balance in Northeast Asia, while addressing the more immediate issue of the North Korean nuclear program.

South Korea's engagement, not unification, efforts with North Korea

Kim Jong-il's failing health has raised important questions for South Korea's security strategy. Since the 1990s, South Korea's security concerns have focused on

³⁵Later, the head of South Korea's intelligence confirmed the story in his briefing to ROK National Assembly members. He reported that Kim was recovering from a stroke, but that his condition was stable and that he was communicating with others. *Chosun Ilbo*, 24 September 2008; *Donga Ilbo*, 24 September 2008. On 23 January 2009 Kim met a special Chinese envoy. *Xinhua New Agency*, 24 January 2009.

³⁶*Segye Ilbo*, 12 November 2008; *Chosun Ilbo*, 8 December 2008.

³⁷In a conference in Tokyo, a former employee of North Korea's spy agency stated that Kim Jong-il's demise will create a power vacuum in Pyongyang. *Chosun Ilbo*, 14 December 2008.

North Korea's nuclear development. Through the two nuclear crises with Pyongyang, Seoul's basic objective was to resolve the nuclear issue through diplomacy. While preventing a military conflict with North Korea has become an important, if not the central, priority, fewer and fewer South Koreans think that North Korea would launch a military attack on South Korea. North Korea's regime instability is seen as more of a threat than its nuclear development. They are also more worried about the US taking military measures against North Korea's nuclear facilities. This reflects South Korea's growing confidence in its superiority over North Korea. While South Korea has achieved democratic transition coupled with an advanced economy, North Korea has become increasingly isolated, with economic crises culminating in famine and mass starvation in the mid-1990s. The conservative Roh Tae-woo government was the first to show signs of a policy shift from confrontation to coexistence in the early 1990s. Despite its confrontation over the first nuclear crisis, the Kim Young-sam government also pursued "engagement based on coexistence", while proposing to "establish long-term exchanges and a gradual, negotiated unification".³⁸

Preventing North Korea's collapse quickly became an important security policy objective in the subsequent administrations. The most obvious case in point was the 'Sunshine' policy adopted by former President Kim Dae-jung. Calling for inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation, he made it clear that South Korea did not intend to absorb North Korea.³⁹ Instead, South Korea would help North Korea with economic recovery and reform so that North Korea could sustain itself in the long term. Eventually, the theory goes, this practice of inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation could lead to a gradual and peaceful unification of the two Koreas.⁴⁰ The subsequent Roh Moo-hyun government likewise took on the 'no collapse and no absorption policy' of Kim Dae-jung. From the very beginning of his presidency, Roh made it clear that he preferred peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas over the sudden collapse and subsequent unification of North Korea. Political unification would come after a long, gradual period of economic and cultural integration.⁴¹

In a break from the Sunshine policy pursued over the past decade by his two liberal predecessors, Kim Dae-jung (1988–2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–08), Lee has signaled that, henceforth, expanded inter-Korean cooperation will depend on progress in denuclearisation under the Six-Party Talks. Not only has this linkage displeased Pyongyang in principle, but it has also resulted in the current stalemate in nuclear negotiations having repercussions on inter-Korean progress.

³⁸Bae and Rozman, "South Korean Strategic Thought on Reunification", 134–9.

³⁹Kim, "Kim Dae-jung daetongryong chuimsa" [Inaugural Address], 25 February 1998.

⁴⁰Kim, "Berlin yonsul" [Berlin Speech], 9 March 2000.

⁴¹Roh, "Kun juyo jihwikwan kwaui daehwa" [Conversation with Military Commanders], 16 June 2006.

Not long after Lee's inauguration in 2008, North Korea fired a barrage of insults and criticism upon the new president. Since then, relations between the two Koreas have deteriorated further. In May 2008, a South Korean woman, on tour to Mt. Kumgang in North Korea, was shot to death by North Korean military guards who claimed she had crossed into a restricted area. As North Korea refused Seoul's demand for a full investigation of the incident, the whole Mt. Kumgang tour business has been suspended indefinitely. More recently, North Korean authorities have further strengthened measures against inter-Korean exchange. Since early October 2008, North Korea has been threatening to halt operations of, and subsequently close the Kaesong Industrial Complex in reaction to the propaganda leaflets that South Korean civic groups are sending across the border.⁴² North Korean authorities disconnected the North-South direct phone line established by the Red Cross for humanitarian purposes.

Such measures have come despite the Lee government's repeated calls for dialogue on further economic aid and exchange. Many experts see this as North Korea's strategy of *tongmi bongnam* [engaging the US while containing the South]. North Korea tends to bypass South Korea and focus only on the US when it comes to key security issues such as nuclear talks or peace talks. Yet, it could be the result of the speculated leadership problems in Pyongyang, with the increasing influence of military hardliners who have been critical of inter-Korean engagement from the beginning. Analysts believe that "the military may have taken the upper hand and that Kim might no longer be wielding absolute authority".⁴³ Some have noted that soon after rumours of Kim's health were publicised in September 2008, North Korea took a "tougher line in nuclear negotiations".

Despite its alleged criticism of its predecessors' engagement efforts, the Lee government does not want to see the collapse of North Korea either. Interestingly enough, the Lee administration does not mention unification in any official documents. For example, the official government policy guideline, One Hundred Government Policy Tasks, does not talk about unification at all. Speaking of inter-Korean relations, the policy guideline discusses a variety of matters including solving the nuclear issue, aiding North Korea's economic reform, addressing humanitarian issues such as expanding family reunions, the return of South Korean abductees and prisoners of war.⁴⁴ Nor do the five priorities of the Lee administration's national agenda include unification: a government that

⁴²*Chosun Ilbo*, 10 November 2008.

⁴³*Associated Press*, 9 September 2008.

⁴⁴Office of the President, *One Hundred Policy Goals of the Lee Myong-bak Administration* (in Korean). <http://www.president.go.kr/kr/policy/data/100policy.pdf>

serves, a dynamic market economy, active welfare, a human resource superpower, and a mature global state.⁴⁵ With only one five-year term to serve, the Lee government does not see much possibility of unification within its tenure. Instead, it sees solving the nuclear issue as a major North Korea initiative.

Preparing for the worst, the North Korean contingency

Given the difficulty of dealing with North Korea's nuclear issue, the prospect of gradual and negotiated unification with North Korea does not look very promising. In the end, the only real possibility of unification could come through North Korea's sudden collapse. No one knows when and whether this could happen. However, Kim Jong-il's ill health have led to increasing speculation about possible regime change, if not collapse in North Korea – sooner rather than later. And it has started discussion of possible unification scenarios.⁴⁶ One thing is clear: the unification process has to and will involve other regional powers from the Six-Party Talks, that is, the US and China in addition to Japan and Russia. This makes unification an important component of South Korea's regional security policy. Even though peaceful coexistence has replaced absorption as South Korea's tacit strategy for unification, strategic planning for the North Korean contingency is required. South Korea's strategic thinking on unification involves the three pillars of Lee's regional strategy: the 'strategic alliance' with the US, the 'strategic cooperative partnership' with China, and finally the Northeast Asian multilateral mechanism.

Close coordination with the US. Any North Korean contingency would require close and effective policy coordination between South Korea and the United States. For one thing, North Korea believes that the US is the most important stakeholder when it comes to the security of its own regime. It goes without saying that Washington's position will be critical for South Korea's unification policy. As the offshore balancer of Northeast Asian geopolitics, the US will have a strong interest in the future of the Korean peninsula. It was US support that largely made German unification possible amidst the reservations and concern of neighbouring countries.⁴⁷ Korean unification will be no different. Furthermore, it was the US along with the Soviet Union that divided Korea six decades ago. Denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula will be the most important precondition for unification for the US. Unlike his criticism of the

⁴⁵Office of the President, *Sung-gong kuriko nanum: Insuwee baekser (Transition Team White Paper)* <http://www.president.go.kr/kr/policy/whitepaper.php>

⁴⁶For China's view on the North Korean contingency, see Glaser, Snyder and Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor*. For a more recent discussion, see Stares and Wit, *Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea*.

⁴⁷For the US role during German unification, see Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*; Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, Ch. 30; Craig and George, *Force and Statecraft*, Ch. 10.

Bush administration's Iraq policy, President Obama has set the same goal of "complete verifiable elimination" of North Korea's nuclear program.⁴⁸ Lee Myong-bak's emphasis on denuclearisation as a precondition for inter-Korean cooperation in this regard works in Washington's interest. Close bilateral cooperation in nuclear negotiation will set the tone of Washington's approach to Seoul's desire for unification.

Close consultation with China. ROK-US policy coordination needs to involve close consultation with another important stakeholder, China. Both Chinese government officials and scholars claim that the nation has no intention of intervening in North Korea's domestic affairs. Yet, they also emphasize China has keen interest in maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula. There have been reports that China is massing troops near its border with North Korea to prepare for any sudden changes there amid growing speculation about the health of leader Kim Jong-il. China's action, it seems, is meant to prevent a massive influx of North Korean refugees if the North Korean regime collapses: "One [US government] official cautioned that the increase in Chinese troops was not 'dramatic,' but he said China was also constructing more fences and installations at key border outposts."⁴⁹ Another study reported that the Chinese military has contingency plans in place. These include controlling refugees, an 'order-keeping' civil police mission and 'environmental control' measures to clean up and secure nuclear weapons and fissile materials at North Korean nuclear facilities near the Sino-DPRK border.⁵⁰ The study, conducted with Chinese experts on North Korea, reported that China is increasingly concerned with possible regime collapse in North Korea and the possibility "that South Korea would seize the opportunity to reunify the Peninsula, with US support".⁵¹ In the case of the North Korean contingency and unification, South Korea along with the US should assure China that any action by the two governments would not intend to cause damage to China's strategic interest in the region, and that they are willing to work closely with China in drawing a future blueprint for Northeast Asia's new security mechanism as well as a peace regime on the Korean peninsula.

Creating momentum with multilateral diplomacy. This leads to South Korea's interest in a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia to create momentum to solve the North Korean nuclear problem. Ironically it was the George W. Bush administration, well-known for unilateralism, that advocated a

⁴⁸Obama Statement on US-North Korea nuclear agreement, 26 June 2008. <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/06/26/mccain-and-obama-on-north-korea/>

⁴⁹*Financial Times*, 13 November 2008.

⁵⁰Glaser, Snyder and Park, *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor*.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

multilateral approach in dealing with North Korea. This was simply because the US did not want to be seen as a unilateral bully in a bilateral nuclear negotiation with North Korea; it wanted to share the burden with other countries, especially China, which was asked to play the role of a 'responsible stakeholder'. And it was also intended to cast North Korea as the party that was stalling the negotiations with unreasonable demands.⁵² South Korea's support for multilateralism may receive important momentum from the new Obama administration. Speaking about a more effective framework in Asia, President Obama specifically mentioned the Six-Party Talks on North Korea as an example.⁵³

Yet the NEAPSM proposed by the Six-Party Talks can also be understood as a way to solve the North Korea question in the longer term. The security guarantee for North Korea, a precondition for giving up its nuclear program, ultimately involves all parties in the region. This means that in order to address North Korea's security needs, there should be a certain peace regime on the Korean peninsula to replace the current armistice. And this requires some kind of multilateral agreement. Such a Korean peace regime could be an intermediate process and must involve the four parties of the armistice. Unification would require the endorsement of the Northeast Asian security mechanism involving all Six-Party members. This does not mean that all of this will happen in an orderly manner. In fact, any event could occur first. But on the other hand, nothing can happen without North Korean denuclearisation. The bottom line is that should unification occur, it has to happen in a multilateral context one way or another.

Conclusion

South Korea's new strategic thinking developed by the Lee government reflects the changing security dynamics between the two Koreas and South Korea's diverse security interests towards major countries in Northeast Asia. At the same time, each pillar of the strategy reflects a part of the contradictory reality facing South Korea. The 'strategic alliance' with the US reflects the contradiction between South Korea's dependency on the US for its defence and its ambition to play a global role as a more equal partner to the US. The 'strategic cooperative partnership' with China reflects the contradiction between the need for close cooperation with China in dealing with North Korea and efforts to mitigate Chinese concern about the strengthening of South Korea's alliance with the US. Finally, the new emphasis on a multilateral security mechanism reflects the contradiction between South Korea's efforts to alleviate its growing geopolitical dilemma with the major powers and its ambition to take the initiative to shape new security dynamics in the

⁵²Cha, "Korea's Place in the Axis."

⁵³The Office of the President Elect, "The Obama-Biden Plan". http://change.gov/agenda/foreign_policy_agenda/

region. Notwithstanding the need for and the boldness of the thinking, it remains to be seen whether South Korea's Lee government has enough assets and skills to manage this ambitious and complicated undertaking.

If and when it should come to unification, South Korea will have to work closely with the United States, while trying to assure the Chinese that Korean unification will not work against their strategic interests in the region. This can be done in the context of a Northeast Asian multilateral security mechanism. No one knows how and when the process will begin. Yet, at the end of the day, unification will be up to the Korean people. And the choice to unify should come from both the South and the North. South Korea's current emphasis on peaceful coexistence rather than sudden unification reflects Seoul's growing confidence with respect to an impoverished North Korea as well as the increasing public sentiment that "many South Koreans are satisfied with peace without unification, hoping to avoid the full costs" of absorbing 28 million hungry North Koreans "by making more modest payments of assistance".⁵⁴ According to a recent survey, more than eight out of ten South Koreans think unification is an important national agenda. However, almost the same percentage of people are against immediate unification. As for the cost of unification, opinion was split with 55 percent saying they are willing to bear whatever cost, while 44 percent are not.⁵⁵

The opportunity to unify the divided nations may finally come within a few years following the demise of Kim Jong-il's regime. South Korea may decide to take the opportunity, or it could opt for the comfort of division, delegating North Korea's fate to the generous intervention of the US and China. It will be South Korea's most important decision in the future. Nevertheless, the outcome will also be up to the North Koreans. Despite his health problems, Kim Jong-il could survive long enough to make another successful power transition. Or, even if he should pass away, North Korea could well muddle through for a long time, albeit bordering on collapse, as a result of sustained assistance from the outside (including South Korea and the US). It all depends on the North Korean leadership and people. And the world will be watching what choice and path the two Koreas take.

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⁵⁴Bae and Rozman, "South Korean Strategic Thought on Reunification", 141.

⁵⁵The National Unification Advisory Council, "2008 nyondo kukmin tongil usik yoronchosa" [2008 Public Opinion on Unification], November 2008.

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