

## **No Time to Fumble with North Korea: Park Geun-hye's Multiple Pivots**

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### **1 Introduction**

No one would be surprised if they were told that South Korea had achieved fully-fledged democracy, particularly during the “2016 Candlelight Vigil Revolution,” a series of massive, peaceful, popular protests by citizens holding up candles in the streets and demanding the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye, daughter of former military dictator Park Chung-hee (1961-1979). Park Geun-hye ended up the first elected president of South Korea to be forced to leave office in disgrace when, on 9 March 2017, South Korea’s Constitutional Court upheld the National Assembly’s 9 December 2016 impeachment vote over her involvement in an influence-peddling scandal with her longtime confidante, Choi Soon-sil., South Korean society, heavily divided along conservative and liberal lines, was gripped by political paralysis amidst the turmoil caused by this scandal.

During the period of Park’s presidency (2013-2016), the foreign policy capabilities of the South Korean government had become seriously compromised, especially in relation to issues concerning North Korea. During the Park administration, North Korea’s Kim Jong-un conducted fifty-five tests of mid- or long-range ballistic missiles. These included the Pukguksong No. 1, the nation’s first submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), tested in August 2016, signaling North Korea’s heightened military readiness with its attempt to produce an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of crossing the Pacific and striking the US. During Park’s presidency, North Korea conducted one nuclear test in 2013 and two more in 2016. Given the Obama administration’s reportedly somewhat pusillanimous diplomatic policy of “strategic

patience” with respect to North Korean issues, Park appeared, by 2016, to have lost much of her diplomatic leverage in this area, appearing to become increasingly reliant on Xi Jinping’s alleged power in order to control North Korea. South Korea came to look like a mere bystander in regional diplomacy in response to North Korea’s continued threats to the international community.

For Park, it seemed as though North Korea was simply being ticked off when it came to diplomatic matters. International relations and Korea specialist Victor Cha (2015) delivered a commentary regarding Park’s “gravitating into the Chinese orbit” as a deliberately strategic diplomatic “upgrade” to “build a trilateral dialogue among China, South Korea, and her key ally the United States about the [Korean] peninsula’s future.” Park’s vigorous diplomatic efforts, as depicted by Cha, fell short, however, ending up as fumbling in relation to North Korean issues, and frustrating China, whose renewed diplomatic friendship with South Korea peaked when Park sat near Xi at Tiananmen Gate in Beijing to watch a military parade marking the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War on 3 September 2015.

On 8 July 2016, the Park administration announced that it would deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System (THAAD), an advanced anti-ballistic missile defense system produced by Lockheed Martin, the associated military technology costing the Park administration approximately ten billion US dollars over the four years of her presidency. This provoked a furious reaction by China. Claiming that the THAAD’s X-band radar would penetrate into China to spy on its missiles, the Xi administration immediately retaliated against South Korea by impeding travel to South Korea by Chinese tour groups and issuing fire safety code violations to South Korean retail facilities in China run by Lotte, the conglomerate that had approved a land swap with the South Korean government for the purpose of deploying the THAAD at Seongju, 125 miles south of Seoul. In short, the Park administration allowed its original diplomatic attention to wander, leading it to stray into an international relations quagmire.

What made Park abruptly turn her back on Xi? What diplomatic and military situations involving China, Japan, and the US, as superpowers active in Northeast Asia, can help us in understanding

Park's seemingly peculiar diplomatic decisions? To assist in answering these questions, I will first chronicle some significant diplomatic and geopolitical events that shed light on the strategies and positions of these superpowers, especially in relation to North Korean threats to the region. I will then offer a critical evaluation that can help account for Park's failed diplomatic legacy with respect to North Korean issues, which I believe can be considered reflective of the broader circumstances leading to her impeachment.

## 2 Park's First Pivot

To begin untangling the diplomatically and militarily complicated geopolitical situation in which Park Geun-hye failed to maintain her diplomatic continuity with China on the one hand and the US on the other with respect to North Korean issues, it is worth mentioning Obama's foreign policy, the "pivot to Asia" that came about amid rising economic and security tensions with China in the region during the early 2010s.

We must first look at efforts by the US during the early twenty-first century to secure its interests in the region. Following the 2008 Democrat victory, the Obama administration responded to China's contentious territorial claims to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea by "affirm[ing] an American vital interest in freedom of navigation in this region and in keeping the region open for normal commercial activities" (Lieberthal 2011). Maritime shipping routes in the South China Sea are estimated to carry trade valued at five trillion US dollars annually. China also became more aggressive in escalating another territorial dispute over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea that places it in conflict with neighboring countries, including the Philippines and Vietnam. It was critical, therefore, from the perspective of the Obama administration, to secure and strengthen America's economic and military capabilities in the region.

The political power transitions in China and South Korea during the early 2010s posed challenges to Obama's "pivot to Asia" policy. From 2009, China had begun to note, in a more public manner, the importance of its "core interests in Asia" to its Communist Party-led political system, as well as in relation to issues of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, national security,

and economic and social sustainability. When Obama made a state visit to China in 2009, both nations respected each other's core interests. However, when China's President Hu Jintao made a state visit to the US in 2011, neither leader made any references to core interests, reflecting the escalation of China's maritime territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas (Campbell et al. 2013). Xi Jinping, who came to power in 2013, showed himself even tougher than his predecessor on China's core interests, for example passing a sweeping national security law in July 2015 by which the nation's core and other interests could be maintained and expanded in a more strategic way than had previously been the case. During the formative years of China's bold international strategy, the Obama administration pushed Japan and South Korea into signing the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) as part of US initiatives to establish a ballistic missile defense system against China and North Korea (Klingner 2012). While South Korea's conservative President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2012) was considered largely pro-American, he still remained hesitant at the time with respect to supporting US initiatives, as well as in relation to taking the agenda of a South Korea-Japan military pact to the South Korean public. This was largely due to his concern about historically deep-rooted anti-Japanese sentiment associated with Japan's brutal colonial rule of the Korean peninsula (1910-1945) and the many unresolved issues associated with this period. Public anxiety over the pact's potential to facilitate Japan's rearmament mounted as it was reported in June 2012 that the Lee Cabinet had approved the pact without providing prior notice to the National Assembly. A mere forty minutes prior to the planned commencement of the signing ceremony in Tokyo on 29 June 2012, South Korea cancelled its participation (Kim 2016). While Lee's surprise visit to the Dokdo islands (known as Takeshima in Japanese) on 10 August 2012 was intended to highlight South Korea's territorial control over the islets, the ownership of which it disputes with Japan, it amounted to an example of populist-cum-nationalist bluster aimed at placating simmering public anger following his recent diplomatic blunder. Predictably, Lee's trip to the islands ended up exacerbating diplomatic tensions between the two countries. From Obama's perspective, it subsequently interfered with US security measures to foil China's core interests in the region.

Secondly, South Korea had exhibited an interesting and ambiguous rapprochement with China after Park's ascendancy to the presidency. South Korea's participation in China's commemorations marking the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II in September

2015, with Park standing close to Xi, led to quite different kinds of concern to be raised. South Korea stood alone among major US allies in sending high-level representation to the event. Park's presence risked placing strains on the "blood-allies" relationship between South Korea and the US, a relationship that arguably forms the bedrock of the former's foreign policy, and without which no professional leader in South Korea would fare successfully in any form of political, economic, or diplomatic negotiation. Thus, it is understandable that Park's participation in the event in Beijing was seen not as undermining the US-ROK alliance, but as strengthening it in a sideways manner. According to Cha, "Park is not distancing South Korea from the United States; she is bringing Beijing closer to Seoul while distancing it from Pyongyang" (Cha 2015). According to this reading, Park was using her long-time personal ties with Xi to mitigate North Korean threats, thereby effectively contributing to US peace-making efforts on the Korean peninsula: It is a well-known story that when Xi visited Seoul in 2005 as the local Chinese Communist Party chief in Zhejiang, Park adjusted her schedule as chairperson of the then majority opposition Hanara Party in order to be able to personally greet him. When Park made a state visit to Beijing in June 2014 in order to finalize the agenda for the South Korea-China Free Trade Agreement, she dubbed her visit as a trip for mutual trust and sincerity (Hwang 2014). Less than a month after being elected president on 19 December 2012, Park sent one of her closest aides as her first envoy to Xi, who had just been elected China's new president one month earlier.

Park's pivot to China, aimed at controlling the threat posed by North Korean, soon showed signs of faltering, however. China did not seem to be as effective as before in containing the North Korea problem. In February 2013, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test, its first under its new young leader, Kim Jong-un. Furthermore, China refused to approve UN sanctions against North Korea. It appeared that China's core interests would not be served by supporting the denuclearization of the Korea peninsula and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. What may be called China's pivot to South Korea with respect to North Korean issues became obscure. On the contrary, China began to ratchet up its own anti-aircraft defense program, announcing in 2005, for example, that it would be purchasing Russian-made mid-range S-400 missiles capable of striking key cities in US-allied nations as well as US military bases in the East China and South China Seas (Gady 2016). While Xi's pivot to South Korea was

presumably an attempt to stretch China's military and political leverage in response to Obama's pivot to Asia, it was hardly a trenchant blade aimed at the removal of North Korea's incessant nuclear ambitions. The regional security environment in Northeast Asia has seen many different sorts of "pivot" by various powers in relation to their own alleged allies, but none has been very effective. Faced with an accelerated level of military competition in the region, Park's South Korea appeared to be unnervingly vying for diplomatic authority.

### 3 Park's Second Pivot

Park Geun-hye's diplomatic faltering is not surprising when it is considered that her government's diplomatic strategies rarely resonated with the South Korean public. To the contrary, the public experienced enormous confusion in relation to the nation's geopolitical position, caught between various superpowers and anxiously haunted by inter-Korea security tensions. As mentioned above, three out of North Korea's five nuclear tests were conducted during her presidency. While South Korean unions and North Korea experts consistently called for the South to develop and implement its own initiatives for dealing with the North's threats, no response was forthcoming from Park. By 2015, two sessions of summit talks had been held with Obama in which it became clear that Park, while concurring with Obama's policy of "strategic patience" in relation to North Korea, was relying upon China's potential role in controlling Kim Jong-un. Obama's North Korea policy obviously incorporated the expectation that China would play its part, but this differed from Park's expectations towards China. The Obama policy, rather than targeting North Korea itself, formed part of overall US China policy, calling on the latter nation to take action in order to deal with the threat posed by the North (Jeong 2017). Park, however, expected more from China, even if this meant endangering the brotherly relationship it had with North Korea, a scenario that would have been impossible to realize. As for US policy, Xi merely adhered to Obama's notion of strategic patience. Against the backdrop of all of these complex strategic considerations by various parties, it was bewildering to witness Park abruptly turning her back on Xi, announcing in July 2016 that South Korea and the US had reached agreement on the deployment of the THAAD missile system. Furthermore, in November 2016, the Park administration signed an agreement with Japan concerning the sharing of military intelligence. This move was seen as pro-Japan and pro-US, and not in

alignment with the former pro-China thrust of her diplomacy.

China might have found a precursor to this odd diplomatic “pivot” at the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ meeting in Malaysia on 4 June 2016, when South Korea’s Minister of Defense officially upheld the US position on China’s military expansion in the South China Sea. Foreign affairs experts deplored the diplomatic inconsistencies of the Park administration, which put at risk South Korea’s geopolitical strategic position, leaving it vulnerably unprepared for future actions taken by the superpowers to protect and advance their core interests (Lee 2015).

In a way, the Park administration deprived itself of diplomatic leverage on North Korea, failing to demonstrate its own strategic geopolitical significance when making diplomatic considerations (in common with its allies, the US and Japan) with respect to North Korean threats. For example, the September 1998 launch by North Korea of its Daepodong-1 missile led to an escalation in military competition in the Northeast Asian region, subsequently resulting in Japan’s decision to participate in the US Theater Missile Defense (TMD) program. This was a historic moment, marking the beginning of a worsening in China-Japan relations and precipitating a swirling vortex of military competition between the two countries (Nam 2017). Similarly, in June 2014, the then US Forces South Korea Commander Curtis Scaparrotti publicly mentioned the possibility of deploying the THAAD system in South Korea. This was in response to the above-mentioned decision by China at summit talks between Xi and Putin in May 2014 to purchase Russian mid-range missiles capable of striking US military bases in the East China and South China Seas. This heightened regional military competition over the past two decades is an unmistakable reflection of the threat posed by North Korea. Each of the superpowers in the region has constantly sought to develop its own initiatives in response to this threat, these measures not always aligning with the interests of South Korea. Meanwhile, the Park administration (in continuity with the previous Lee administration) stayed away from North Korea, hastily underestimating its northern neighbor, simply trying to do away the South’s legacy of ambivalence in relation to the North on one hand, while failing to implement any proactive military or security measures vis-à-vis North Korea on the other.

#### 4 Park, a Product of Anti-Communism and the Cold War



As the favored child of President Park Jung Hee, one of the most notorious and resolutely anti-Communist dictators of the 1960s and 1970s, Park was extremely skeptical of, and hostile to, the Sunshine Policy espoused by the Kim Dae-jung (1998-2002) and Roh Mu-hyun (2003-2007) governments. This initiative was intended to bring about the conditions for gradual change in North Korea through economic cooperation and the building of trust between the two Koreas. Park believed that the liberal-left governments' reconciliation project facilitated North Korea's nuclear ambitions by providing the nation with funds that could be used as the North saw fit. After North Korea rapidly followed up its fourth nuclear test on 6 January 2016 with the testing of a long-range Gwangmyungseong missile capable of carrying an ICBM on 7 February 2016, the Park government shut down the Kaesong industrial complex in North Korea that had been in operation since 2004 as part of the Sunshine policy and that had been symbolically hailed as a significant step forward in achieving economic cooperation and reconciliation between the two Koreas. Since its inception, the inter-Korean economic cooperation project had remained largely unaffected during any periods of significant deterioration in North-South relations (except for when North Korea withdrew its workers for more than four months in protest at joint South Korea-US military drills in April 2013). This was largely due to the mutual benefits enjoyed by the two Koreas as a result of the program, with the South benefiting from a cheap and skilled labor force, and the North from the South's payment of ten million US dollars for its annual wages. A National Assembly public opinion survey conducted by Gallup Korea in February 2017 on the first anniversary of the shutdown revealed a deep sense of frustration (75%) among members of the South Korean public at Park's failure to rise up to the inter-Korea security challenge (Ha 2017).

The anachronistic, anti-Communist political surveillance heavily favored by Park drove South Korean society into a friend-enemy dichotomy (Sung forthcoming). For example, more than nine thousand anti-Park artists, singers, actors, actresses, and cultural performers were blacklisted, charged with being "pro-North Korea," and illegally prevented from gaining access to government subsidies to help them defray expenses associated with their productions and performances. In the summer and fall of 2014, a million South Koreans resorted to using a German mobile messenger service in response to relentless anti-Communist online snooping by



the government as public concern grew in connection with privacy infringements in the aftermath of the unlawful execution of warrants for real-time wiretapping of anti-Park union activists by the National Intelligence Service (Song and Jung 2014; Kwon 2015). During Park's reign, conglomerates such as Samsung suffered damage at the hands of her cronies, who plotted sit-ins by ultra-conservative pro-Park groups in order to protect her from dissenting voices, while involving themselves in activities intended to achieve benefits for themselves and their allies, as in the case of a merger involving two Samsung affiliates in 2015 aimed at strengthening corporate control by the owner.

The compulsive nature of the Park regime's egregious domestic anti-Communist activities sat awkwardly alongside its dreadful diplomatic failure in dealing with North Korean issues. Park's staunch anti-Communism obscured and impaired South Korean diplomatic strategies that may have helped balance the nation's own core interests with those of its giant allies with respect to North Korea. Diplomacy, particularly in the case of countries caught between superpowers, such as South Korea, requires subtlety and agility when negotiating and shoring up geopolitical positions. Park Geun-hye's impeachment shows, however, that the South Korean public was not constrained by Park's political parochialism, which had entailed diplomatic risks to the nation, calling for South Korea to adopt its own clear and balanced policy initiatives in relation to North Korean issues.

On 9 May 2017, South Korea elected a former human rights lawyer, Moon Jae-in, as its new president. While campaigning in 2016, he declared that he would visit North Korea in order to hold talks as soon as he was elected president. He was heavily burdened by this declaration, later in his presidential campaign clarifying that his willingness to visit the North would be based on the achievement of a consensus with the US. Moon has emphasized that his government will align itself with the Sunshine Policy of his liberal left predecessors, preferring talks over sanctions. But he has had to deal with the counterargument that any pro-talks policy might facilitate the North's nuclear ambitions. On 14 May 2017, a few days after Moon's victory, North Korea tested a missile that suggested it had made progress in successfully producing an ICBM. In response, Moon stressed the immediate readiness of the South Korean military to act against "an enemy," while choosing the Ministry of Defense as the first government department

to visit following his election. At the time, commentators and the media speculated that Moon may have switched to a “sanctions” policy in relation to North Korean issues (Lee 2017). Immediately following Moon’s Defense Ministry visit, North Korea used its official government press outlet to denounce Moon’s use of the term “enemy” as an implicit reference to the North, stating that “the South just flirted with foreign superpowers against the North.” On 30 June, during his first state visit to the US, Moon delivered a keynote speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, articulating his four North Korea-related policy principles as part of a Moon-Trump summit agreement, promising “to not pursue hostile policies against North Korea” and claiming that the South had “no intention to attack North Korea,” “no wish to see its regime replaced or collapsed” and “no plans to artificially accelerate reunification on the Korean peninsula” (Moon 2017). On the one hand, South Korea’s new president would never want to repeat any of the failed, mischievous pivots of his predecessor, Park Geun-hye, that stripped the country of its diplomatic leverage as well as its capability to deal with North Korea on its own. On the other hand, Moon should not expect to be able to merely restore the Sunshine Policy in order to make progress on his own North Korea initiatives, given the complexity of public opinion in the South, the North’s erratic conduct, as well as Donald Trump’s apparent absence of diplomatic resources with which to deal with North Korea. How well Moon can hold his ground without reactively pivoting in the face of such challenges remains to be seen.

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