Letting Off Steam: South Korea’s Role in Northeast Asia
By Joon Hyung Kim

Given the many fault lines that could trigger conflict in Northeast Asia, the recent changes in leadership in the region could lead in two very different directions — one peaceful, one not — depending on how foreign policy unfolds in different capitals, especially Beijing and Washington.

South Korea’s new president, Park Geun-hye, has a unique opportunity to steer the country in a direction that helps facilitate peace and stability in the region, writes Joon Hyung Kim.

With new administrations chosen recently in all five countries in Northeast Asia as well the United States, some people are hopeful that these almost simultaneous leadership changes will offer a fresh start in regional relations following tensions caused by the floundering of the global economy, North Korea’s continuing provocations, ongoing territorial disputes, the unsettling rise of China and the apparent US intention to contain it. And although it might seem understandable in the face of such leadership changes to talk of a fresh start, the reality belies such wishful thinking. Indeed, that kind of euphoria may set everyone up for a fall into despondency later.

Not only are the sources of these tensions still very much present, the changes have brought several hawkish bloodlines to power. In addition, all of these transitions have one common denominator — namely, domestic politics are driving foreign policies. Since most of these countries face serious domestic problems, most notably economic revitalization and the need to consolidate new regimes, they may be tempted to take a hard-line approach to foreign policy by fomenting hostile nationalism towards the outside world.

Interestingly, most of the new leaders are not really new faces, and a common characteristic is their link to the past, especially to Cold War legacies. The new Japanese and both Korean leaders are all dynastic successors of iconic Cold War figures. Kim Jong Un is a grandson of a World War II criminal, the former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi. The new Chinese leader Xi Jinping is a princeling and hereditary communist who is a son of a revolutionary hero from the Long March.

The remaining two leaders cannot be called fresh faces, either. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who led what was essentially an authoritarian regime during his previous tenure as president, returned to power on a campaign to revive a strong Russia through a hard-line foreign policy. While US President Barack Obama may be largely free of the hostile Cold War legacies of these other leaders, he is also hobbled by divisive domestic politics in shaping the foreign policy of his second term. Moreover, indications that the US “pivot” to Asia is aimed at containing China may portend more frictions to come.

Therefore, the situation is not likely to veer abruptly from the past, especially not in a positive direction. From a Korean perspective, it is reminiscent of 60 years ago or even 110 years ago, when Korea became the victim of great power rivalry due to its assured geopolitical location on the Korean Peninsula. As a result, the country cannot help but be very sensitive to growing frictions in the region. South Korea’s long-held fear is that power struggles between the larger countries in Northeast Asia will plunge it into a maelstrom. It is a stark and unfortunate reality that South Korea has little room to maneuver. Without a doubt, Washington and Beijing are the main variables. The domestic politics of China and the US and the relationship between the two countries will mainly be responsible for the big picture in the region. In this context, the new Park administration will have to carefully analyze how the US-China relationship unfolds and act with great care. Although the situation is not likely to change radically for the moment, if it does change, there are two opposite scenarios possible.

**THE ‘YANG’ SCENARIO**

It seems likely that America’s strategic pivot to Asia will continue during Obama’s second term. Although Obama’s policy toward China has gradually grown tougher over the years, the US still considers China an indispensable partner and doesn’t want to risk a clash. Since the end of the Cold War, US policy has...
routinely fluctuated between containment and co-operation. There are areas where the interests of the two clash, but at the same time, because they share a deep interdependence, it’s unlikely that the differences would lead to a conflict. Also, co-operation has been strengthened through strategic dialogues over the past few years, and the US and China have co-operated within various international organizations and regimes despite differences in opinion.

Although the US isn’t expected to give up completely its containment strategy, the fact that China hasn’t clearly declared an intention to challenge US hegemony makes this positive scenario plausible. Also, the US plans significant reductions in defense spending over the next 10 years because of the federal budget deficit, and this will make it difficult for the US to pressure China militarily. It also remains questionable whether the Southeast Asian countries that the US is currently courting for military co-operation would go along with a US strategy to contain China. For now, these countries are employing pendulum tactics between the two superpowers. While they seem to welcome the new overtures from the US, they are all economically dependent on China. Therefore, the situation might at most produce a loose buffer zone, rather than a tight coalition against China. A marked improvement in US-China relations is, without a doubt, the most favorable scenario for the Korean Peninsula, because if the US-China conflict intensifies, the military alliance among Korea, the US and Japan would have to be reinforced, increasing the likelihood of confrontation with China and North Korea.

THE ‘YIN’ SCENARIO

While it isn’t likely that differences between the US and China will escalate into an armed conflict in the near future, there are numerous possibilities for frictions to worsen with time. If China pursues the stance that Asia is its backyard and the role of the US should not be paramount, the balance between containment and co-operation by the US could easily collapse. China is already interpreting the US pivot as a strategy to counter its growing power, and in response, it is likely to increase its military capabilities, triggering a further response from the US and thus catalyzing the security dilemma.

Another factor that could worsen US-China relations is the clash of fundamentally different ideologies and identities. With the change of leadership in China and the re-election of Obama, the possibility of a conflict between American exceptionalism and Chinese nationalism has increased. It is difficult for the American people to accept the fact that their country, which dominated most of the 20th century, is in decline and the most obvious challenger for global dominance is China. Also, it’s important to recognize that American exceptionalism is still an important factor in US foreign policy, despite its weak foundations. For these reasons, Washington will continue to criticize and provoke China on sensitive issues such as human rights, currency manipulation, democratization and political corruption.

In turn, China’s leaders cannot afford to let America’s provocative political rhetoric go unanswered. The process of regime succession in China is sensitive enough, and it comes at a time when the legitimacy of communist ideology is waning, while nationalism is rising. Furthermore, China’s unprecedented economic growth is showing signs of slowing. If the economy falters, the new leadership would be tempted to blame the outside world. If economic growth slows down considerably, the issue of rampant corruption combined with a dangerously widening income gap could cause public frustration with the political system to explode. In this case, Chinese foreign policy would likely turn tougher toward the US as a way to distract the public from domestic problems, accelerating the US-China conflict.

One consequence of increased tensions is that the US will seek to strengthen its military alliance with Japan and South Korea. A confrontation US would embolden Japanese hardliners, as we have already witnessed in some disquieting signs of Prime Minister Abe’s hawkish foreign policy, which itself is becoming an additional destabilizing factor. Also, the ongoing battle over disputed islands in the South China Sea could escalate at any time. The US, meanwhile, will press Japan and South Korea to increase their defense spending, given the pressure on the Pentagon’s budget. As demonstrated by South Korea’s controversial purchase last year of Patriot III missiles, this will mean going beyond simply buying sophisticated weapons systems to actually participating in America’s missile defense network. While it might be understandable for the US to push for expansion of its missile defense network following North Korea’s third nuclear test, doing so in Northeast Asia on behalf of Japan and Korea would not be acceptable to China. Also, the new Chinese leader Xi will not abandon the nation’s long-held policy of propping up North Korea no matter how unruly its behavior is. For the US to use its alliance with South Korea to contain China would be an unfortunate scenario, especially for Seoul.

SOUTH KOREA: DIPLOMATIC STEAM VENT

South Korea’s best policy option would be to increase the likelihood of the “Yang” scenario and reduce the likelihood of the “Yin” scenario, which is easier said than done. South Korea’s Northeast Asia policy over the past five years under former President Lee Myung-bak was almost a return to the Cold War era, especially with regard to North Korea. A policy of deterrence and containment might play well to a certain domestic audience in South Korea, but it isn’t likely to be in the country’s long-term interests, given the status of the divided nations and South Korea’s heavy trade interdependence with China.

South Korea’s new president seems to recognize this dilemma. Unlike Lee, Park is more moderate and is expected to take a more flexible approach toward North Korea, despite their common conservative orientation. She has criticized Lee’s policy for failing to change the North’s provocative behavior. Although Park insists that Pyongyng must win Seoul’s trust by becoming less hostile, she seems to eschew the tactics that helped cause the existing frictions and has moved on from the sinking of the naval corvette Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. Park has also promised to pursue a more balanced foreign policy, which she believes will contribute to the region’s stability. She has repeatedly emphasized the critical importance of the US-South Korea alliance, but she also vows to put more effort into deepening ties with China, which stagnated under Lee. Significantly, Park dispatched her first special envoy to China, a deviation from the tradition of her predecessors, who sent their first overseas delegation to the US. The desirable model would be for South Korea to function as a conflict “mitigator” when US-China relations worsen and to function as a “catalyst” for co-operation when relations turn positive. Despite Park’s good intentions, playing such a role will not be easy for South Korea.

North Korea’s recent nuclear test and rocket launch added one more headache for the new administration. It may provide an impetus for political conservatives in South Korea to push Park back to a hard-line stance toward the North. Also, Abe is using North Korea’s provocations to justify his hawkish and nationalistic stance. As demonstrated in his recent meeting with Obama in Washington, Abe is also seeking to put a strong
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Second, multilateralism in Northeast Asia should be actively pursued.

Third, a diversification of agendas is necessary.

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US-Japan alliance on full display to send a signal to an assertive China. Washington, for its part, has generally favored a closer and stronger trilateral alliance in the region, which has put Seoul in a difficult position.

Again, US foreign policy will be a key factor. If the US pursues a predominantly confrontational approach, Northeast Asian politics will inevitably become polarized. Unlike the US or China, South Korea is not autonomous enough to have a dominant influence on Northeast Asian politics. Nevertheless, South Korea must not hurry to take sides. Complex and dynamic situations require Seoul’s diplomacy to be creative and sophisticated. The following tactics can be considered good stepping-stones in this direction:

First, South Korea’s diplomacy needs to be more neutral, if not ambiguous. When one considers the delicate situation in Northeast Asia, South Korean diplomacy has recently been very easy to decipher. Under Lee, South Korea took sides through its pro-US and pro-Japan policies. As a result, South Korea’s relations with China and Russia have suffered. Until the US and China achieve a new balance of power in the Asia-Pacific political order, there will be a prolonged tug-of-war. South Korea needs to pursue “middle power diplomacy” by becoming neutral in the rivalry between the US and China.

Second, multilateralism in Northeast Asia should be actively pursued. While the US-created hub-and-spoke framework and its alliance strategy are still prevalent, they are giving way to an increasingly bipolar order given the rising tensions between the US and China. A direct channel for security co-operation among Northeast Asian countries should also be pursued, which would enhance trust among the parties involved. The easiest way to do this immediately would be to resume the Six-Party Talks. There is a need to resolve North Korea’s nuclear issue through these talks and then develop them into a permanent multilateral organization in Northeast Asia. Another step would be to establish a trilateral strategic dialogue among the US, China and South Korea, which would help reduce confrontational politics.

Third, a diversification of agendas is necessary. North Korea’s nuclear weapons development, territorial disputes and joint military training are very sensitive issues that are likely to cause tension and conflict in Northeast Asia. These issues are critical and pressing, but it is also important to create a framework of co-operation on issues such as the environment, human rights, economic co-operation and international development. Such diverse co-operation would help to neutralize or dilute the impact of sensitive issues, on the one hand, and help establish trust among countries at a lower cost, on the other.

The last but most important task is improving relations between North and South Korea. As mentioned earlier, worsening relations between the two Koreas have provided a justification not only for the US containment policy toward China but also a revival of Japan’s right-wing militarism. For more than 20 years, all efforts from strict sanctions to engagement have failed to stop Pyongyang’s nuclear development. Even the strongest sanctions have not led North Korea to abandon its nuclear program, which the Kim leadership sees as the only way to ensure survival. In the absence of any real leverage, it may be time for South Korea to be more realistic by switching its top priority from denuclearization to arms control.

None of these steps will be easy to accomplish, but they are the best possible options for South Korea. Park should distinguish between the goals she can achieve and those she cannot in a single five-year term. Denuclearization of North Korea is likely a goal that cannot be achieved in that timeframe, whereas easing tensions with the North does appear achievable. Similarly, the ability to significantly influence the behavior of the two superpowers probably can’t be achieved, while the ability to play the role of a facilitator or mediator between the two is possible.

Northeast Asia today is like a pressure cooker filled with steam. A pressure cooker has a critical part called a steam vent that allows excess pressure to be released to prevent the appliance from exploding. South Korea must take the role of this release valve in the region as best it can. This year in Northeast Asia will be a busy one diplomatically, but only sophisticated diplomacy can put a silver lining around the dark clouds forming over this volatile region.

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