South Korea and North Korea are locked in a devilishly tangled series of policy dilemmas, a Rubik’s Cube of complex alternatives, most of them frustrating. President Park Geun-hye’s trust-building initiatives, if pursued properly, may hold the key to solving this puzzle once and for all, writes Alexandre Y. Mansourov

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN South and North Korea is like an intricate three-dimensional puzzle where the issues of power, dignity and trust are interlocked and devilishly hard to resolve. The complexities of the current state of the North’s Rubik’s Cube are bound up in three unorthodox policies initiated by Kim Jong Un as a way to cope with his father’s three-fold legacy. In turn, this requires a three-pronged policy response from South Korea. For this 3x3x3 puzzle to be solved, each dimension—national power, mutual respect, and bilateral trust must be aligned properly with two others. With so many possible permutations for this puzzle, the number of optimal solutions that would allow it to be solved in less than a few hundred moves is very limited.

Over several decades many international players have attempted to solve the North Korean puzzle but failed. Speed cubing won’t work. The key is not to seek a solution too quickly, but to find a workable method, without cutting corners, and master it. President Park Geun-hye’s current “trust-building process” offers some hope that, if refined, it can actually solve the North Korean Rubik’s Cube in our lifetime.

KIM’S THREE-FOLD INHERITANCE
Kim Jong Il’s legacy in foreign affairs is daunting. His policies seriously weakened the country’s national power, hurt its dignity and undermined international trust in North Korea. His son, Kim Jong Un, inherited the Songun (military-first) policy that drained the country’s economic resources to beef up the military and secure the regime at the expense of everyone else. As a result, Kim became heir to what was widely perceived as a “beggar-state”—a weak and isolated country that was virtually on its knees and on the verge of economic collapse, a country that became a laughing stock after it botched its rocket launch in April 2012. The international perception of North Korea was that Pyongyang could be pushed around and bullied into submission.

Young President Kim was also left with the deep-seated mistrust of the international community, which, in the view of his advisers, was always long on promises and short on delivery. The North Korean narrative describing its international engagement during the Kim Jong Il era highlights the fact that two great powers—the former Soviet Union and the United States—made two grand promises to the North—to build a Soviet light water reactor (LWR) in the 1980s and a US LWR in the 1990s. For its part, North Korea made two grand bargains with them—the 1985-1989 nuclear accords with the USSR and the DPRK-US Geneva “Framework” Agreement in 1994. In Pyongyang’s view, these ended with two great betrayals after both the accords and the Agreed Framework collapsed in 1991 and 2002, respectively. Hence, Pyongyang has “zero trust” in the good faith of the international community with respect to its security and has a powerful incentive to continue its hedging behavior by advancing its strategic weapons programs.

Finally, Kim Jong Un inherited the frustrating and unhealthy cycle whereby every time the North Korean government attempted to exercise what it perceived as its sovereign rights, the international community punished it with new and tougher international sanctions, and Pyongyang then sought talks to get some relief and buy time for advancing its arms and economic development programs.

All in all, Kim Jong Un inherited a three-fold legacy and challenge in foreign affairs. First, he had to figure out how to change the international image of North Korea as a weakening so that the world would stop bullying it, respect the dignity of its leadership and begin to pay serious attention to its interests and concerns. Second, he was faced with the policy dilemma of why he should give up more for less in strategic bargaining with his opponents on the global stage. Kim’s challenge was to design a new foreign policy that would increase his influence and regain international respect without giving away the family jewels. Third, he had to break the vicious cycle of international punishment for what Pyongyang regarded as legitimate behavior serving its national interests.

THREE NEW POLICY INITIATIVES
Since he assumed power in December 2011, Kim Jong Un has approached his foreign policy challenges from three different directions. He did not win any new friends, but managed to keep his enemies at bay for the time being.

First, at the beginning of 2013, Kim scrapped the legacy policy towards the South, at least, symbolically, by abrogating all North-South agreements reached by his father and grandfather in the preceding half-century and suspending even those inter-Korean cooperation projects that survived Lee Myung-bak’s rule in South Korea, including the Kaesong Industrial Complex (which has since reopened). This was a bold way to clear some political and legal space from the debris of the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration in 2000 and to position Kim for designing his own policy toward the South.

Second, Kim’s extremely bellicose response in March-April 2013 to UN Security Council resolutions 2087 and 2094 put a hard-line floor underneath his new policy toward South Korea and the US. It altered the former international perception of North Korea as a begging weakening
and forced the international community to view Pyongyang more seriously. Arguably, through his spring “nuclear threat” offensive, Kim Jong Un succeeded in thwarting the momentum of anti-North Korea sanctions and raised the perceived costs of any new anti-North Korea actions for South Korea and the US. That said, it remains to be seen whether these moves will ultimately compel the US and its allies to acquiesce to North Korea’s nuclear weapons state status, to recognize its right to conduct missile and nuclear tests and to dissuade the United Nations from resorting to new sanctions in the future.

Third, in June 2013, Kim unveiled his own trademark policy towards the South — the “enmeshment” policy designed to use South Korea as a sledgehammer in breaking the vicious cycle of international punishment for the North’s behavior and in circumventing existing international sanctions and embargoes.

The enmeshment policy pursues the development of a co-dependent relationship where two dissimilar systems — North and South Korea — peacefully co-exist in a stable symbiosis, i.e. a more or less intimate association in which Pyongyang leeches off Seoul, using it as a source of revenues (principally for food) for its domestic development and as a defensive shield in its external relations. Enmeshment is derived from the Kim family’s long-standing unification strategy, which is aimed at binding South Korea to the North, frustrating US policy goals on the peninsula and driving a wedge into the South Korea-US alliance. This would demonstrate to China that North Korea has alternatives and can survive even without Chinese help, thereby nudging Beijing off its increasingly tough stance towards Pyongyang, as well as overcoming international isolation by using inter-Korean relations as a loophole and Seoul as a lever.

The enmeshment policy is designed to engulf and entangle the South in a complex web of inter-Korean co-operation projects, which should prevent the South from abandoning the North and cutting off its bloodlines even if the US or UN order it to do so. Enmeshment is also expected to increase both South Korean and international resources available for North Korea’s domestic development, to sharpen existing conflicts in South Korea and allow the North Korean regime to penetrate and manipulate the South Korean decision-making processes.

The North Korean leadership uses the Kaesong Industrial Complex as a pivot to turn South Korean policy around in a direction favorable to the North. The enmeshment policy is all about taking away the power of economic “blackmail” from South Korea without sacrificing North Korea’s nuclear blackmail.

The South Korean government demanded “credible safeguards” against any arbitrary closures of the Kaesong Industrial Complex for political or military reasons under any circumstances in the future. Pyongyang embraced this demand, turned the tables, making Seoul commit itself to the same. Why? Because the North wants to bind the South to continued inter-Korean exchanges even when the rest of the world will seek to impose more biting international sanctions against North Korea and pressure Seoul to shut down Kaesong after future missile and nuclear tests, which might come this year.

Seoul also demanded the “internationalization” of the Kaesong Industrial Complex as a risk management strategy. Pyongyang agreed because this would allow the North to bring Chinese and Northeast Asian investors into the zone, which South Korea had long objected to, and would give Pyongyang leverage if Seoul decides to walk away. Kim Jong Un wants to use Kaesong to roll back Lee Myung-bak’s “May 24 measures,” which banned investment in North Korea following the May 2010 sinking of a South Korean naval vessel by a North Korean submarine. Kim would like to re-open other venues of inter-Korean co-operation that were frozen by Lee, including the Mount Kumgang tourism project, family reunions, joint infrastructure development projects, joint fishing zones in the West Sea, and so on. Kim will attempt to apply the same standards — mutual guarantees against arbitrary closures and internationalization — to all inter-Korean projects.

Pyongyang wants to use Seoul to fight its battles against international sanctions. For instance, now it is up to the South Korean government to figure out how it is going to overcome the UN ban on “bulk cash” transfers to North Korea if the Mount Kumgang project is revived. It is Seoul’s headache now, not Pyongyang’s.

The real test for the viability of the new agreements over Kaesong will be when Pyongyang decides to test an intercontinental ballistic missile, probably as early as this fall. The missile launch and almost certain subsequent UN actions will put pressure on Seoul to choose sides again, while giving Pyongyang a moral upper hand. It is not clear whether the North-South deal on the resumption of operations at Kaesong can survive North Korea’s next missile and nuclear tests, as Kaesong survived the 2006 and 2009 tests, or if it will meet the fate of the infamous North Korea-US “Leap Day agreement,” the Feb. 29, 2012 promise of humanitarian aid in exchange for North Korean nuclear disarmament that was dead two months later after the failed North Korean rocket launch. If the current August 14 agreement survives the next tests, it will confirm to Pyongyang that its new “enmeshment” policy is working.

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**ENMESHMENT MEETS TRUST-BUILDING**

President Park may be well advised to refine her “trust-building” initiative to better cope with Kim Jong Un’s “enmeshment” policy by hooking North Korea’s supreme leader onto the South Korean side and transforming critical security risks into new opportunities for greater economic interdependence and co-prosperity. One unconventional approach to building genuine trust between the two Koreas is for Seoul to switch from demonization to “heroization” of the North Korean supreme leader, and to shift the policy line on critical security risks from “no” to “yes” by taking the lead and embracing Kim’s enmeshment policy to cover all of North Korea.

The first initiative under the trust-building pro-
One unconventional approach to building genuine trust between the two Koreas is for Seoul to switch from demonization to ‘heroization’ of the North Korean supreme leader, and to shift the policy line on critical security risks from ‘no’ to ‘yes’ by taking the lead and embracing Kim’s enmeshment policy.

cess aims at normalizing inter-Korean ties through establishing new practices of mutual respect and commitment to agreements. Accordingly, instead of demonizing Kim Jong Un, making a caricature of him and alienating him, the Park administration could try to approach him as a normal person, and even as an equal statesman; they could make him a “hero” and “Gorbify” him in the same way that the Mikhail Gorbachev became a hero in the West as his rule eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. By making Kim a hero of sorts, Kim could rise above his potential power rivals and reform North Korea out of existence, thereby expediting Korean reunification on South Korean terms, which would advance Park’s vision of “a unified Korea that ensures happiness on both halves of the peninsula.”

The second initiative under the trust-building process seeks to establish a sustainable peace on the peninsula through wide-ranging efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue by striking a balance between inter-Korean co-operation and working with the international community. In my opinion, the South Korean government can transform the existing North Korean security risks into unprecedented opportunities to enhance inter-Korean trust by saying “yes” to joint efforts in sensitive security areas instead of “no” to Pyongyang’s unilateral plans to provide for its own security. First, instead of chanting the mantra of “No Nuclear Weapons” and making denuclearization a precondition for any substantive progress in bilateral relations, Seoul can say “yes” to co-operative nuclear threat reduction programs and joint North-South civilian nuclear industry development projects. Second, instead of emphasizing the “no” to the North’s nuclear proliferation, the South can say “yes” to joint North-South nuclear technology exports. Third, instead of stressing “no” on Pyongyang’s space launches, South Korea can say “yes” to joint rocket launches and joint space exploration and propose something similar to the Soviet-US Soyuz-Apollo program in the 1970s-80s.

Pioneering inter-Korean co-operation in the nuclear and space areas will foster the attainment of Park’s goal of building political and military trust between Seoul and Pyongyang and allay the security concerns of the two Koreas and their neighbors. Moreover, joint nuclear energy sector co-operation projects could contribute to developing a uniform energy infrastructure, re-integrating the peninsula-wide power grid, and shaping the energy requirements of the future unified Korean state, which is one of the goals of South Korea’s national development strategy and reunification plan. Joint nuclear exports could give Pyongyang the opportunity to end its illicit nuclear proliferation activities, leave the nuclear black market and join Seoul as a legitimate business partner in the construction of civilian nuclear facilities for peaceful use around the world. Launching a joint inter-Korean space program will go a long way to increase transparency, define a peaceful direction and reduce international concerns about North Korea’s long-range missile program, let alone to build political and military trust between the two Koreas.

The third initiative under the trust-building process envisions “infrastructure reinforcement for unification,” including efforts to improve North Korea’s self-sufficiency, e.g. building infrastructure for electricity, transportation, telecommunications and so on. In my view, the Park administration can counter Kim Jong Un’s enmeshment policy by upping the ante and proposing to expand its scope beyond Kaesong and Mount Kumgang to gradually cover all of North Korea. Seoul can propose building magnet joint industrial complexes modeled after Kaesong in every North Korean province, offering employment and a personal stake in the improvement of inter-Korean ties to as many as four million North Korean citizens — almost one-sixth of the North’s entire population. In the process of developing dozens of joint industrial zones, the South can promote global standards and introduce market rules and better business practices in the North, thereby inducing gradual market-oriented economic reforms and increasing economic interdependence between two Koreas.

The South Korean government can start off with the achievable, like its “Green Détente initiative” aimed at creating a North-South environmental community that will co-operate on agricultural and environmental issues. It can then move to enmesh North Korea in an interwoven web of inter-Korean ties and projects distributed across North Korea so that it would be increasingly difficult for Pyongyang to subvert or walk away from inter-Korean co-operation. Hopefully, the North Korean leadership will gradually begin to see the economic and political reforms to be proposed by the South in addressing its own concerns and benefiting its own core interests. Such a policy refinement will reflect Park’s promise “to help North Korea develop its economy and fight poverty,” while creating a favorable environment for the improvement of governance and human rights in the North.

BRINGING DOWN THE WALL

Just as the Rubik’s Cube has an internal fulcrum enabling each face to turn independently, thus mixing up and aligning the colors, the inter-Korean relationship has its pivot mechanism dictating power alignments, level of trust and mutual respect. At present, the wall inside the hearts and minds of Koreans on both sides of the DMZ blocks the pivot of inter-Korean co-operation. Bringing down this wall is a prerequisite for solving the North Korean Rubik’s Cube. President Park’s ultimate goal of “making Korea whole again” can be attained only if the wall of mutual suspicion and hatred is demolished, which will unlock the internal pivot mechanism of inter-Korean co-operation and unleash the power of ingenuity and dynamism for the entire Korean nation.

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