IT HAS BEEN TWO YEARS since trustpolitik was first introduced in an article written by South Korean President Park Geun-hye, then the frontrunner among candidates seeking the nomination of her party for presidency. In the article, “A New Kind of Korea: Building Trust between Seoul and Pyongyang,” which appeared in the September/October 2011 issue of Foreign Affairs, presidential candidate Park laid out the theoretical and historical contexts of trustpolitik. At the time of publication, policymakers and academics across the political spectrum both within South Korea and abroad pondered the specific meaning of this unfamiliar concept, and how it would be translated into actual policy should she eventually become president.

So now that two years have passed since the initial introduction of trustpolitik, and it has more or less become the flagship policy of the Park administration, what is the current status of and future prospect for trustpolitik? Although it may be premature to thoroughly evaluate the effects of trustpolitik only six months into the current administration, given that it is the policy that will be in place for the remainder of Park’s presidency it would be meaningful and timely to assess its achievements, future tasks and directions.

THE STATUS OF TRUSTPOLITIK TODAY
According to the latest polls, the South Korean public rated the foreign policy and North Korean policy based on trustpolitik as the most successful aspect of the Park administration over the past six months. There is a general consensus even abroad that such a positive reception from the public is due to the fact that the administration maintained a stable stewardship over the affairs of the state based on a firm and resolute deterrence even in the face of unrelenting provocations from the North during the initial months after the inauguration of her administration. Another source of credit is its series of successful diplomatic achievements through summit meetings with the United States, China, and Russia as well as regional and global meetings such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and G-20.

If so, how has trustpolitik managed to gain such broad support, not only from the South Korean public, but also from governments around the world that have vastly different interests and points of view?

First and foremost, trustpolitik seems to be well received because it is a realistic and balanced policy that has significant potential to effectively overcome the current difficulties facing South Korea while also laying the foundation for a new Korean Peninsula, a new Asia, and eventually a new future. On this point, key global leaders and experts, including Secretary General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon, have given their enthusiastic endorsement, and this has been reaffirmed in President Park’s meetings with the US President Barack Obama and the Chinese President Xi Jinping.

In particular, trustpolitik has transformed South Korea’s policy toward North Korea. Whereas the policies of past administrations have gone from one extreme to another, the current administration’s policy toward the North is the policy of alignment, which is neither a coercive policy nor an appeasement policy, but rather an effective and balanced combination of contending or competing policy options, such as inter-Korean and foreign relations, pressure and dialogue, and deterrence and co-operation, while separating humanitarian issues from those related to politics and security. It is a policy that is strong when there is a need to be more firm, and flexible when there is a need to be more receptive.

The recent agreement between the two Koreas on the normalization of the Kaesong Industrial Complex is a case in point of South Korea’s new policy toward the North yielding positive results. North Korea has been on a campaign of daring provocations since the beginning of the new administration in Seoul, culminating in the unilateral withdrawal of workers from the Complex, the only inter-Korean economic cooperation project that has lasted throughout the past decade. However, after four months of shutdown, Pyongyang eventually agreed to the re-opening of the joint industrial zone under the new formula of “progressive normalization.” Such an agreement is seen as the consequence of Seoul’s sticking to a consistent stance that Pyongyang has to respect international standards and norms and abide by its promises, or otherwise pay a penalty for broken promises — the key elements of trustpolitik as set out in the Foreign Affairs article. It also demonstrates the possibility of a paradigm shift in inter-Korean relations because it marks the first time that Seoul has departed from its past practice of either easily accepting or helplessly enduring North Korea’s self-indulgent behavior.

Meanwhile, Seoul’s decision to allow humanitarian assistance to be provided to North Korea via international organizations such as UNICEF is also in line with one of the central tenets of trustpolitik. The policy supports the provision of assistance to the most vulnerable in North Korea such as infants and pregnant women regardless of the status of the political situation between the two Koreas.

Over the course of the past six months of implementing trustpolitik, there has been increasing...
Trustpolitik as a foreign policy is a natural extension of President Park's politics in general. The successful outcomes of the South Korea-US Summit and South Korea-China Summit were possible because there was a mutual sense of trust between the leaders and a shared sense that relations can be built on such trust. Our historical experience also tells us that among nations, the ability to sustain cooperation has always reflected the level of trust. In this regard, trust is an asset and public infrastructure efficiency of various forms of transactions that take place within the community. Furthermore, trust strengthens solidarity among members of a society, serving as a prerequisite for a society to become a more meaningful community. It is in this light that the Park administration has placed great emphasis on the necessity to return to normalcy by fighting corruption and eliminating past unjust practices, in the hope of building a society where members feel a sense of reliability towards each other with a high level of trust.

TRUSTPOLITIK AS A VISION, PHILOSOPHY AND POLICY

Trustpolitik is President Park’s overarching political philosophy. It is a vision as well as a policy tool that is applied in both domestic politics and international relations. At its core lies the concept of “trust.” Trust is an indispensable asset that is required to foster cooperation not only among individuals, but also among nations. It is also a form of social capital that is essential for a community to prosper by elevating the level of recognition not only in South Korea but also in the international community as a whole that trustpolitik is a realistic policy that would contribute to peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia.

This positive reception of trustpolitik as well as the meaningful progress made in inter-Korean relations and South Korea’s foreign relations may be attributed to the nature of trustpolitik itself — as a vision and a philosophy as well as a policy tool.

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for international co-operation. Furthermore, without trust, sustainable and genuine peace is not achievable.

As a result, the implementation of trustpolitik can be seen as an effort to forge a higher level of co-operation among nations built on trust. Trustpolitik is neither a utopian idealism that shies away from realpolitik nor a naive political romanticism. Rather, it takes into account Korea’s unique historical experiences as well as a hard assessment of the political realities on the Korean Peninsula, in Northeast Asia and in the international community.

Indeed, the methodology of implementing trustpolitik is actually embedded in its core concept of trust itself. As illustrated by the Korean proverb that “one-handed applause is impossible,” trust cannot be built with only one side making the effort. In order to build a more enduring and lasting trust, one party must clearly show the willingness to use robust and credible deterrence against breaches of agreements by the other party, while leaving open the possibility for constructive co-operation. Furthermore, the spontaneous shaping of trust is virtually impossible. It requires time and patience to consistently apply principles of trustpolitik in the face of obstacles. Its process is like building a brick house one brick at a time. In this sense, there is no room for political convenience or fast-track results in trustpolitik. As the underlining assumption of the concept of trustpolitik is the building of trust, trust cannot be built with only one side making the effort. In order to build a more enduring and lasting trust, one party must clearly show the willingness to use robust and credible deterrence against breaches of agreements by the other party, while leaving open the possibility for constructive co-operation.

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man question” was associated with the lasting peace of Europe, and the Israeli-Palestinian issue is connected to peace in the Middle East, issues of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia are intimately interrelated. Although the region has issues other than those of North Korea, the trust-building process on the Korean Peninsula and the initiative for peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia are expected to reinforce each other, thus facilitating the earlier realization of a new Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia.

RESPONSIBLE MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY

On the other hand, another important goal of trustpolitik is to contribute to the peace and development of the world beyond just the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. As such, South Korea seeks to play an even greater role in responding to various global challenges such as dealing with new types of security threats, promoting human rights, and addressing the issues of economic change and the global economy, among others. In multilateral fora such as the United Nations, the G-20, APEC, and others, South Korea aims to contribute in responsible and constructive ways to the process of forming global rules and norms. As a successful front-runner in development, South Korea will also spread its modern industry and social security system to the world and help the world hold for it.

South Korea’s Policy Towards North Korea: A Short History

Park Chung-hee

General Park came to power in 1961 through a military coup. Despite clashes and hostility promoted by Kim II Sung through the 1960s, negotiations on reunification were conducted in secret, leading in 1972 to a joint statement specifying that reunification must be achieved peacefully and internally with no reliance on external forces or outside interference with the aim of national unity coming before ideological and political systems. Progress was halting before Park was assassinated in 1979.

Chun Doo-hwan

General Chun assumed power in 1980. The US disliked Park’s unification proposals, and they were dropped soon after his death. As Chun came to power the Cold War was at its height, and in foreign policy he focused on fighting communism in North Korea and from the Soviet Union and China. In 1982, he announced the “Korean People Harmony Democracy Reunification Program,” but amid repeated rejections from North Korea the program stalled.

Roh Tae-woo

Roh became the first elected president of South Korea in 1988. His signature policy, nordpolitik, related to North Korea. It promoted efforts to reach out to and ultimately normalize relations with China and the Soviet Union, North Korea’s traditional allies, both to improve South Korea’s economy and to leave the North isolated and with no choice but to open itself up and reduce military tensions.

Kim Young Sam

Kim’s administration from 1993 was preoccupied with a domestic anti-corruption drive, but was notable for starting by reaching out to North Korea. But after Pyongyang in 1994 said it planned to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Kim adopted a hardline stance, promoting the idea that the North was close to collapse.

Kim Dae-jung

At his inaugural speech in 1998, Kim changed direction by announcing his Sunshine Policy, which aimed to improve inter-Korean relations through peace, reconciliation and co-operation and by offering unconditional economic and humanitarian aid to North Korea. Thousands of prisoners were given amnesty, family reunions held, and in 2000 a breakthrough North-South joint summit with Kim Jong-il that began the ongoing process of direct contact with Pyongyang.

Roh Moo-hyun

Taking office in 2003, Roh continued Kim’s Sunshine Policy, but faced challenges including the hardline US stance on North Korea after the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001 and the North’s 2006 nuclear test. Nevertheless, in 2007 South and North agreed to restart talks, and Roh achieved a second joint summit, which ended with a pledge on both sides to formally end the war.

Lee Myung-bak

Lee began his presidency in 2008 by ending the Sunshine Policy as costly and ineffective, provoking Pyongyang’s anger. He adopted a tougher stance aimed at negotiated, reciprocal initiatives. Relations worsened, but in 2009 began to thaw after the North sent a delegation to Kim Dae-jung’s funeral. Pyongyang promised to ease border restrictions and restart family reunions. Tensions flared again amid growing conflicts, then the South Korean warship Cheonan was torpedoed in March 2010. Both sides cut ties. In November the South was put on war alert as the North shelled Yeonpyeong island, and further skirmishes followed. After a North Korean long-range rocket test, Lee strengthened South Korean defense in 2012 in a deal with the US to lengthen the range of its ballistic missiles.

Park Geun-hye

Amid intense provocation from the North before and after the 2012 presidential election, including missile and nuclear tests, General Park’s daughter won and took office in February 2013, announcing a “new era of hope and happiness” for Koreans and her new North Korea policy of trustpolitik, establishing “mutually binding expectations based on global norms” with an eventual aim of peaceful unification. It demands that North Korea keeps agreements it makes to establish trust and faces certain consequences for actions that breach the peace.