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# Resurgent Trilateralism in Northeast Asia

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## SUMMARY

- The military confrontation between North Korea and South Korea in the closing months of 2010 was a time of maximum danger for the Korean peninsula. But it also offered a rare opportunity for reinvigorating alliance cooperation between the United States, South Korea and Japan.
- North Korea's shelling of South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island on 23 November seemed to be part of a pattern of deliberate provocation by the North. The intention appeared to be testing the political resolve and military preparedness of the government in Seoul, while shoring up the authority of the Pyongyang government, which faces economic difficulties and a politically challenging leadership transition. Yet by early January 2011 both governments were signalling a much more accommodating approach to one another.
- As a consequence, there has been a new spirit of resolve and cooperation between the United States and its key East Asian allies, Japan and South Korea. Their partnership appears to be evolving from separate, strong bilateral alliances into a closer, more substantive arrangement.
- The Obama administration seems to be moving away from the cautious policy of 'strategic patience' with North Korea of the last two years, and towards the more active pursuit of talks with Pyongyang.
- Transforming rhetoric into concrete progress will be difficult, not least because improving relations between the international community and the DPRK is likely to require a range of complex initiatives.
- The focus on re-exploring the opportunities for dialogue currently embraced by all the parties that have a stake in peace on the Korean peninsula represents an important and encouraging sign of a new commitment to end the impasse.

## INTRODUCTION

The closing months of 2010 were a time of maximum danger for the Korean peninsula. In the wake of the sinking in March of the *Cheonan*, a South Korean corvette, with the loss of 46 lives, and the revelation in November of a new and massive North Korean uranium enrichment centrifuge facility, international opinion was already concerned about the intentions of the Kim Jong-il administration. The decision by the North to fire a salvo of artillery shells at South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island on 23 November, killing two South Korean marines and two civilians, seemed to be part of a pattern of deliberate provocation. Determining the intentions of the North is always difficult, but the attack appeared to be an effort to test the political resolve and military preparedness of the South Korean government of Lee Myung-bak, while shoring up the authority of its own government, which is facing economic difficulties at home and undergoing a politically challenging leadership transition from an ailing Kim Jong-il to an untested and largely unknown heir-apparent in the form of Kim Jong-un, the 27-year-old youngest son of the Dear Leader.

The exchange of artillery fire between the two Koreas marked a sharp escalation of tensions. Not only was this a rare instance of the North striking at the land-based territory of the South, whereas past engagements have been confined to maritime skirmishes in the contested area of the West (or Yellow) Sea, it was also a stand-off that threatened to escalate very rapidly into a potentially catastrophic full-blown military exchange between the two sides. President Lee warned publicly and unambiguously that further provocations from the North would be met by an immediate military response from the South, prompting widespread fears that tit-for-tat retaliations would transform a localized conflict into a devastating war, with civilian and military casualties in the hundreds of thousands, economic and physical destruction on the peninsula, and wider ramifications for the peace and stability of the Northeast Asian region.

Despite these tensions, by January 2011 the mood music appeared to have changed sharply, with both governments signalling a much more accommodating, constructive approach to one another in their respective New Year statements and expressing a willingness to engage in direct talks as a means of avoiding further conflict. This rhetoric, while welcome, raises important questions about the prospects for a genuine improvement in relations between the two Koreas in 2011. Worrying as the events of 2010 have been, one benefit has been an apparent new spirit of resolve and cooperation between the United States and its core Asian allies – Japan and

South Korea. Washington has long enjoyed close and effective relations with Seoul and Tokyo. The difference now is that this partnership appears to be evolving from important bilateral partnerships into a somewhat novel trilateral arrangement. Although there has previously been a measure of political trilateralism, the common challenge posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) appears to be pushing this relationship in a more substantive direction, with scope for new, unprecedented security and intelligence trilateral cooperation between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul.

### **Explaining the stand-off over Yeonpyeong**

For the Republic of Korea (ROK), and much of the international community, including the United States, the North's shelling of Yeonpyeong was an act of deliberate and reckless provocation. By contrast, the DPRK presented its intervention as a defensive response to hostile actions on the part of the South, referring to both the ROK's marine corps-based *Hoguk* (Defence of the Country) military manoeuvres of 22 November and the South's live-fire drills that took place on 23 November itself, just before the North's artillery barrage.

The key contextual issue in this dispute is the absence of any consensus between North and South regarding the formal territorial demarcation line separating the area in which Yeonpyeong, along with four other contested islands, is situated. The so-called Northern Limit Line (NLL), which the South sees as defining the boundary of South Korean maritime space and sovereign control, was established following the armistice of 1953 that signalled the suspension of formal military hostilities between North and South. Disputes surrounding the absence of a commonly agreed maritime boundary have been compounded by disagreement over territorial waters. In the aftermath of the Korean War, the South, along with the United Nations Command (UNC), initially argued for a minimalist posture, advocating a limit of three miles from their respective coastlines. The North has adopted a more expansive position, defining its territorial waters as extending from anywhere between 12 and 50 miles beyond its coastline. Applying either of the North's physical boundary claims, Yeonpyeong and other contested islands in the West Sea fall within the North's jurisdiction, and on this basis the DPRK has long argued that vessels travelling to and from these islands must seek permission to do so from Pyongyang.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> International Crisis Group (2010), 'North Korea: The Risks of War in the Yellow Sea', *Asia Report* No. 198, 23 December, pp. 2–3, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/north-east-asia/north-korea/198-north-korea-the-risks-of-war-in-the-yellow-sea.aspx>.

So pronounced is the disagreement between North and South over maritime boundaries that since the 1970s the West Sea has seen frequent intense naval clashes between the two countries. In November 2009, a North Korean patrol boat, the *Tungshan'got-383*, was escorting Chinese and DPRK fishing vessels in waters close to the NLL. On crossing two kilometres south of the line, the North Korean side became involved in a heavy exchange of fire with a number of South Korean vessels that inflicted heavy damage on the DPRK patrol vessel and killed its captain.<sup>2</sup> To some observers, the legacy of this tactical humiliation for the North is a key to explaining why Pyongyang may have chosen to retaliate by authorizing an attack on the *Cheonan*, which was sunk in the disputed waters of the West Sea.

There is also an important political context that appears to have contributed to growing distrust between the two Koreas. In October 2007, the progressive ROK administration of the late President Roh Moo-hyun agreed with the North, at the inter-Korean Summit, to establish a 'special peace and cooperation zone' in the West Sea, intended to enhance confidence-building measures between the two sides and lower the risk of conflict in the region. In early 2008, the new conservative administration of Lee Myung-bak effectively walked away from this understanding, choosing instead to make any future aid to and dialogue with the North conditional on advancing measures to dismantle and eliminate the DPRK's nuclear weapons programme. This tough posture, while distinguishing Lee from his predecessor, contributed to a marked cooling in inter-Korean relations and may have been seen by the North as another act of intentional provocation by the South.

Toughness, and the need to appear resolute in the face of the North's efforts to test the South's resolve, is key to understanding the actions of President Lee. Elected in 2008 on a ticket explicitly advocating a break from the Sunshine Policy that had been central to the engagement strategy of both Kim Dae-jung and his successor, Roh Moo-hyun, Lee had – for reasons of political consistency – little choice but to respond vigorously to the North's shelling of Yeonpyeong. Nonetheless, in its immediate aftermath, Lee adopted a pragmatic posture, seeming to want to minimize any risk of escalation of the conflict. However, public opinion in the South acted as a major brake on any initial instinct that Lee may have had to adopt a cautious stance. South Koreans have become increasingly anxious and angry in the face of worsening tensions with the North. Opinion polls from as recently as March 2009 have indicated that only 29.5% of South Korean respondents

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

expressed 'concern' about insecurity on the Korean peninsula. By March 2010, in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* sinking, this figure had risen to 66.8%. After the Yeonpyeong shelling the numbers had gone up to 81.5%.<sup>3</sup> So intense was this pressure that it appears to have prompted the president to fire Defence Minister Kim Tae-young at the height of the stand-off with the North – arguably an odd decision in the midst of strategic crisis, but one which may have made sense politically, given the weakened domestic position of the president.

With domestic politics seemingly driving both Koreas into an uncompromisingly adversarial show-down, President Lee committed the South to carry out further military exercises on Yeonpyeong on 20 December. In anticipation of this, the North threatened to retaliate and to launch a 'sacred war' against the South, raising widespread fears that the situation was about to spiral out of control and plunge the peninsula into full-scale war. Yet at the eleventh hour the North chose to ignore the South's second round of exercises on the island, as well as a much larger set of military manoeuvres that took place on the peninsula proper, close to the 38th parallel, on 23 December.

How should one explain this unexpected self-restraint on the part of the North? It may simply have been a demonstration of the effectiveness of deterrence. The decision by the administration of Barack Obama to deploy the *USS George Washington* to the West Sea and its firm and very public support for its South Korean ally reinforced the strategic reality that the North remains outgunned by the United States and the ROK. Equally important, North Korea's own ally, China, may have played a key role behind the scenes in persuading its leadership to refrain from further provocations. In public, the Chinese leadership has adhered consistently to a position of not blaming or criticizing to the North. However, according to Shen Dingli, a respected international relations specialist at Fudan University, in private (perhaps in part with prompting from the United States) the Chinese moved in late December to restrain the North.<sup>4</sup>

One, somewhat ironic consequence of the North's restraint is that it is now able to present itself as the voice of moderation in the current dispute. On 10 January it formally invited the South to participate in talks on enhancing bilateral economic ties, while on 13 January it used a diplomatic hotline to call

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<sup>3</sup> EAI Center for Public Opinion Research, 'The Impact of North Korea's Artillery Strike on Public Opinion in South Korea', *East Asia Institute Briefing on Public Opinion* No. 91, 2 December 2010, p. 2, [http://www.eai.or.kr/data/bbs/eng\\_report/201012069541626.pdf](http://www.eai.or.kr/data/bbs/eng_report/201012069541626.pdf).

the South. Part of the motivation behind such initiatives may be a desire to secure a propaganda victory. Indeed, there remains much hindering an improvement in relations. The North continues to bolster its military deployments close to the five contested islands in the West Sea, while the South has made it clear that it wants both an apology and an admission of responsibility from the North for the *Cheonan* sinking and the Yeonpyeong shelling before it is prepared to countenance a return to substantive discussions.

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<sup>4</sup> Shen Dingli, 'Building Regional Stability on the Korean Peninsula: A Chinese Perspective', Center for US-Korea Policy Newsletter 3-1, January 2011.

## LIMITED PROSPECTS FOR ENHANCED DIALOGUE

Both Koreas face political obstacles at home that may constrain their room for cooperation. In the wake of a surprise decision in early January 2011 by South Korea's ruling Grand National Party (GNP) to reject the president's appointment of his presidential secretary, Chung Tong-ki, as head of the Board of Audit and Inspection – an important, independent monitoring body – speculation has increased that Lee is becoming a lame-duck head of state despite having two more years of his five-year presidential term to serve.<sup>5</sup> In such a context, his opportunities to offer concessions to the North may be severely restricted.

In the North, the political tussle over the succession process to replace Kim Jong-il may be a source of unexpected domestic instability. South Korean media reports have suggested that a purge has been under way since December, with the aim of limiting the authority of prominent officials, including most notably Kim's brother-in-law Jang Song-taek.<sup>6</sup> Given that he is 64 and has considerable bureaucratic experience, Jang has been seen by some as an important source of stability and institutional continuity, able to function as a *de facto* political regent, providing guidance to the new heir-apparent. If these reports of internal dissension are to be believed (and one should keep in mind that reports of political change in the North, particularly those emanating from the South, are often highly contentious), then the political transition process may be much less secure and predetermined than initially suggested.

In the light of such political uncertainty, the initiative for promoting a political breakthrough between the two sides may rest with external actors. Here, the signs may be encouraging. The Obama administration appears to be moving away from the relatively cautious policy of 'strategic patience' with the DPRK that it has adopted over the last two years, and towards the more active pursuit of talks with the North. In early January, it sent the president's special representative on North Korean issues, Stephen Bosworth, to the region for discussions not only with the South Koreans and the Japanese, but also, importantly with the Chinese. Given its substantial economic investments in the North, its acute sensitivity to the risks associated with strategic uncertainty on the peninsula, and its desire to avoid a destabilizing regime collapse in the DPRK, China has self-interested reasons to support Washington's more pragmatic approach. At the same time, Sino-US relations have become more

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<sup>5</sup> 'Nomination fiasco,' *Korea Times*, 11 January 2011.

<sup>6</sup> 'N. Korea purging protégés of the "Old Guard"', *Chosun Ilbo*, 14 January 2011.



contentious in recent months, given American concerns about China's expanding military and power-projection capabilities in the Pacific, notably its planned acquisition of aircraft carriers, its development of sea-based anti-ship ballistic missiles, and most recently reports of a new-generation Chinese stealth fighter-plane. President Hu Jintao's January visit to Washington for meetings with President Obama was a key opportunity to focus on the North Korean situation, although most of the progress on this issue took place behind closed doors rather than in public, with some reports indicating that the Chinese leadership has become more willing, at US prompting, to pressure North Korea on the nuclear issue. A hint of this important development was a reference in the summit communiqué to both countries' concern at the DPRK highly enriched uranium programme and a recognition that bilateral talks between the two Koreas must precede any resumption of the six-party-talks process.<sup>7</sup>

Politics will, once again, be likely to act as a brake on dramatic progress. China is, nominally at least, sympathetic to the arguments that present the North as a victim rather than the aggressor in its recent stand-off with the South. It will be reluctant, therefore, to do anything – at least in public – that can be construed as selling its North Korean ally short. President Obama, for his part, will need to be mindful of the need to avoid a rift with the new 112th Congress in which the Republicans have much enhanced clout. Particularly in the influential House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, now chaired by the hawkish Republican Representative, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the administration can expect to encounter strong opposition to any notion of compromise with or concessions to the North.

### **Opportunities for trilateralism**

Given the limitations inherent in the Sino-US relationship, Washington may choose to concentrate its energies on its partnership with its two key Northeast Asian allies. Here the opportunities are promising. Despite criticism in some quarters of a diplomatically weak performance by Obama at the G20 summit in Seoul last November, current bilateral ties between Washington and Seoul are good. This is partly a function of personal chemistry – Lee and Obama reportedly get on well with one another. It also reflects recent progress, at least at the executive level, in pushing forward talks on ratifying the South Korea–US (KORUS) Free Trade Agreement (most notably

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<sup>7</sup> Howard LaFranchi, 'China-US Summit: Which Country Gained the Most?' *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 January 2011.

important concessions for the US auto industry agreed between Washington and Seoul in December) and the political benefits of the United States' swift and very high-profile despatch of naval support to the South in the wake of the Yeonpyeong shelling. The relationship is not entirely trouble-free. Some South Korean conservative commentators, frustrated by a sense of the ROK's impotency in the face of the North's provocations, have argued that the South should develop its own nuclear deterrent – a step that would be counter to the Obama administration's ambitious nuclear non-proliferation policy and directly at odds with South Korea's role as host of the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit. On the whole, however, the security partnership with the United States remains strong. The ROK has continued, whether via the dispatch of South Korean peacekeeping forces to Afghanistan or in its training of military forces such as in the United Arab Emirates, to demonstrate the close convergence between its security policy and that of the United States.

A similarly positive partnership exists between the United States and Japan. Under the premiership of Naoto Kan, who took office in June 2010, relations between Washington and Tokyo have improved markedly, moving away from the pattern of frustration and miscommunication that seemed to dominate it under Kan's predecessor, Yukio Hatoyama. After the deterioration in Sino-Japanese ties that followed the collision between a Chinese trawler and Japanese coastguard vessels in 2010, the governing Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has backed away from Hatoyama's equidistance strategy and the notion that Japan was intent on qualifying its commitment to the United States by tilting politically towards Beijing.

The Kan administration has initiated a number of key political and security policy changes that have been enthusiastically welcomed in the United States. These include:

- Renewal of Japan's \$5 billion financial commitment to Afghanistan;
- Extension of Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF) anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden;
- Commercial withdrawal from Iran's Azadegan oil-field project – a step that helps to reinforce the US nuclear non-proliferation strategy;

- Promulgation in December 2010 of a new set of National Defence Programme Guidelines with a focus on flexibility, the development of more mobile forces and the need for new 'dynamic defence capabilities';
- Consideration of the possible relaxation of Japan's traditional ban on arms exports – a step that would enhance US alliance partnerships with a number of states worldwide that could take advantage of advanced Japanese weapons capabilities.
- Raising the possibility of new legislation to allow the overseas despatch of Japan's Self-Defence Forces (SDF).<sup>8</sup>

All told, the message coming out of Tokyo is a very loud re-emphasis of the importance of the US–Japanese alliance and a commitment to avoid some of the tensions associated with the previous Japanese government, most notably over the status of US forces in Okinawa. Japan's Foreign Minister, Seiji Maehara, underlined this message during his January visit to Washington when he laid out a range of areas for closer bilateral cooperation in areas including democracy enhancement, conflict prevention, peace-building, and the coordinated application by both states of civilian power to address global security and political challenges.<sup>9</sup>

Japan's pursuit of a reinvigorated foreign policy is taking place in the domestic political context of Prime Minister Kan seeking in early 2011 to refute criticism that his government is adrift and insufficiently focused on concrete policy reforms. In his New Year press conference, the prime minister talked of a 'reopening of the Japanese market' and appeared intent on pushing a portfolio of radical policy reforms reminiscent of the dramatic changes of the Meiji Restoration of 1868 or the post-1945 reforms associated with the Allied occupation of Japan.<sup>10</sup> Such changes may include a decision by Japan to join the US-backed Trans-Pacific Partnership. That would require, among other things, major agricultural liberalization in Japan, which would entail a clash between the government and the small but politically powerful farming lobby. The prime minister is talking also of revisiting the vexed question of Japan's Consumption Tax; corporate Japan sees this as an

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<sup>8</sup> For an extended discussion of these themes, see Jeffrey Hornung, 'More than Futenma', *Pacnet* No. 61, Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 10 December 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Seiji Maehara, 'Opening a New Horizon in the Asia Pacific', *Statesmen's Forum*, CSIS, 6 January 2011.

<sup>10</sup> '2011 must begin a decade of revival', *Daily Yomiuri*, 8 January 2011.

essential step in improving the parlous state of the country's public finances, but the issue entails high political risks given that it had seriously undercut support for the government in the 2010 elections to the Upper House of the Japanese Diet. With public opinion polls recording a sharp drop in support for the Kan government, falling by 12 points from January to February to a new low of less than 20%, doubts are emerging over the government's long-term viability. Internal party tensions – not least rivalry with Ichiro Ozawa, a party elder currently suspended from the DPJ following his indictment on corruption allegations, and the threatened formation of a rival parliamentary bloc of some 16 Ozawa DPJ loyalists – along with the need to manage the Upper House, where the DPJ has only minority status, are all major obstacles for Kan, but for now the government appears intent on recapturing the political initiative both at home and abroad.

Strong bilateral alliances offer a promising platform for closer trilateral coordination and cooperation between Seoul, Tokyo and Washington. Already there are signs of important steps in this direction. On 6 December 2010, the foreign ministers of South Korea and Japan met with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Washington for discussions on North Korea, as well as on a broad range of security issues relevant to East Asia, including nuclear proliferation, piracy, disaster relief, environmental policy and counter-terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Equally important, both symbolically and practically, has been the evidence of early steps in the direction of enhanced cooperation between the armed forces of the three countries. In July 2010, officers from Japan's MSDF were observers at joint US–ROK operations in the Pacific, and in December their Korean counterparts played the same role in US–Japanese military operations. Perhaps most surprising of all has been the start of serious discussions in January 2011 between the Japanese and South Korean defence ministers about measures to enhance security cooperation between their countries. This would stop short of anything approaching a formal military alliance, but would embody two major initiatives, namely:

- An Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement to allow reciprocal provision of supplies and administrative services between the SDF and ROK military during overseas missions, and

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<sup>11</sup> Patrick M. Cronin, 'Testing Trilateralism', *PacNet* No. 59, Pacific Forum, CSIS, 7 December 2010.

- A General Security of Military Information Agreement establishing guidelines to prevent confidential military information shared between the two countries from being compromised.<sup>12</sup>

Such initiatives are a first step, and one should not minimize the depth of suspicion that exists within South Korean public opinion about Japan's military and political ambitions in the region. However, Prime Minister Kan has made significant progress in improving the tenor of Japanese-Korean relations, in part because of his public expression in 2010 of 'deep remorse and heartfelt apology' for Japan's actions during its period of colonial domination of Korea from 1910 to 1945.

Japan's pragmatic overtures are not limited to South Korea. Recent public statements by Foreign Minister Maehara suggest that, for the first time in many months, the Japanese government may be serious about finding a way to resolve the deadlock with the DPRK over the fate of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>13</sup> The abduction issue has long been a stumbling block to improved relations with the country, and in turn has limited the role that Japan can play in the Six-Party Talks process intended to deal with the nuclear challenge posed by the DPRK. Whether North Korea will respond positively to such overtures or prefer to criticize the enhanced security cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo is unclear. At the same time, the Kan administration will not want to get out of step with its South Korean neighbour which – judging from the collapse of military talks between the ROK and DPRK in early February – remains highly sceptical about the merits of any major new dialogue with the North.

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<sup>12</sup> 'Japan, ROK said eyeing defense ties/Joint statement may be signed on Lee's visit', *Daily Yomiuri*, 5 January 2011.

<sup>13</sup> 'Maehara hopes that 2011 yields North dialogue', *Japan Times*, 5 January 2011.

## CONCLUSION

The focus on re-exploring the opportunities for dialogue currently embraced by all the parties that have a stake in peace on the Korean peninsula represents an important and encouraging sign of a new commitment to end the impasse. Transforming rhetoric into concrete progress will be difficult, not least because improving relations between the international community and the DPRK is likely to require a range of complex initiatives including a new confidence-enhancing multilateral security regime for the Korean peninsula; negotiations on a peace treaty to replace the 1953 armistice; a more regularized US relationship with the North, perhaps in the form of permanent liaison offices in both countries; and an ambitious programme of humanitarian and economic assistance that could be used as an incentive to encourage progress on the nuclear issue.

For now, the international community can be cautiously optimistic about future prospects given this convergence of views among the key policy actors, the common recognition of the need to prioritize the importance of minimizing the security risks on the Korean peninsula, and the new signs of enhanced security cooperation between Washington, Seoul and Tokyo.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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