

# Can the Korean Princelings Make Progress?

CHARLES ARMSTRONG

History looms large in Northeast Asia today. This is not only because of ongoing “history wars” over Japanese aggression in the World War II era and enduring territorial disputes in the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. History is especially visible because, for the first time, the leaders of all four states in the region (China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea) are scions of former national leaders.

Chinese President Xi Jinping’s father Xi Zhongxun was a guerrilla comrade of Mao Zedong and vice prime minister of the People’s Republic of China. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is the grandson of Nobusuke Kishi, a prime minister in the late 1950s. South Korean President Park Geun-hye is the daughter of Park Chung-hee, the military strongman who oversaw South Korea’s “economic miracle” in the 1960s and 1970s. And North Korea’s Kim Jong-un is the son and grandson of the North’s first two Supreme Leaders.

It is not yet clear what influence heredity will have on relations among the four “princelings” (as the Chinese would say) who govern Northeast Asia. However, history is already playing an important if ambivalent role in inter-Korean dynamics.

On the one hand, the record of hostility between the two ruling families does not bode well for Seoul-Pyongyang relations. North Korean commandos infiltrated the South and tried to kill Park Chung-hee in January 1968. Park Geun-hye’s mother was killed in 1974 by a gunman sympathetic to the North, who was attempting to assassinate the South Korean president. North Korean media even today denounce Park Chung-hee as an evil dictator and his daughter as guilty by association.

On the other hand, Park Chung-hee was the first South Korean leader to reach out to the North, and along with Kim Jong-un’s grand-

father, Kim Il-sung, he signed the first inter-Korean communiqué on peaceful unification in 1972. Park Geun-hye herself visited Pyongyang as a South Korean National Assembly member in 2002 and met with Kim Jong-un’s father, Kim Jong-il. For all the official criticism of Park, North Korea’s leaders seem to see her as someone they might be able to work with—unlike her predecessor, the much more overtly hawkish Lee Myung-bak.

In the spring of 2013, tensions between North and South Korea, and between North Korea and Washington, reached their highest level in years. North Korea protested United Nations sanctions imposed after a nuclear test by Pyongyang in February, condemned US-South Korean joint military exercises, threatened the United States with nuclear retaliation in the event of hostilities on the peninsula, declared the end of the Korean War armistice, and announced a “state of war” with the South.

Yet, on June 6, when the dust had barely settled from the confrontations, Pyongyang proposed cabinet-level talks between the North and the South, the first such talks in six years. Although the talks broke down before they had even begun, due to a dispute over the rank of the South Korean delegate, Pyongyang came back in early July to negotiate reopening the Kaesong Industrial Complex, the South-North joint business venture in North Korea, closed unilaterally by the North in May. The Kaesong talks got off to a bumpy start as well, but after the collapse of Seoul-Pyongyang dialogue during Lee Myung-bak’s presidency (2008–13), the two sides at least were negotiating, rather than just exchanging threats and insults.

## TESTING TRUSTPOLITIK

Well before her election as president in December 2012, Park Geun-hye voiced a commitment to North-South dialogue that would be neither the unconditional engagement of President Kim Dae-jung’s “Sunshine Policy” nor the confron-

---

CHARLES ARMSTRONG is a professor of history and director of the Center for Korean Research at Columbia University. His latest book is *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950–1992* (Cornell University Press, 2013).

tational posturing of the conservative hard-liners. She articulated her “Trustpolitik” in 2010–11 just as inter-Korean conflict was escalating dangerously over the sinking of the South Korean naval corvette *Cheonan*, blamed on the North, and the North Korean shelling of Yeongpyeong Island that killed four South Korean civilians. Trustpolitik suggested a flexible approach to the North that would emphasize cooperation if North Korea kept its agreements with South Korea and the international community, but “assured consequences” if Pyongyang broke the peace.

While still trying to placate her conservative base with tough talk of retaliation against future North Korean provocations, Park has shown a much greater commitment to dialogue with Pyongyang than her immediate predecessor. It remains to be seen whether Park’s trust-building approach will yield fruit in inter-Korean relations. But clearly Lee Myung-bak’s North Korea policy was an abject failure: His uncompromising hard line neither facilitated regime change in Pyongyang nor dissuaded the North from acts of provocation, as we saw this past spring. It certainly did not prevent North Korea from expanding its nuclear weapons capability.

Like the first George W. Bush administration and its “Axis of Evil” rhetoric, which seems to have inspired Lee, the South Korean equivalent of neoconservative North Korea policy only made the situation on the Korean peninsula more dangerous. A passive Barack Obama administration, with a vague non-policy toward North Korea that it called “strategic patience,” went along with Lee and his hard-liners rather than coming up with a positive policy of its own.

## NO ILLUSIONS

We now have a president in Seoul with first-hand knowledge of North Korea, whose father was the first South Korean president to deal directly with the North. It seems unlikely that Park would have many illusions about the nature of the North Korean regime or the likelihood of its imminent collapse. For all its deep dysfunctions, not least in the economic realm, North Korea has lasted for 65 years under the rule of the same family and political system. Liberal economic reform is an extremely tough prospect for North Korea, at least in the near term, given the closed nature of the society. But neither is regime change visible on the horizon, despite some wishful thinking in both Seoul and Washington in recent years.

The weight of history suggests North Korea may be with us for some time to come, more or less as it is today. Perhaps only a South Korean leader who has the impeccable conservative pedigree of Park Geun-hye—and who happens to be extremely popular at home—could lead South Korea toward a sustained cooperative relationship with the North through the many bumps that no doubt lie ahead. Just as only Nixon could go to China, perhaps only Park could go to Pyongyang—again.

In any case, it is time to stop wishful thinking and waiting for the “North Korea problem” to solve itself. Patience is not a policy; only clear-headed engagement will address the critical issues of the Korean peninsula. Seoul’s new leader seems to have the focus and discipline required for such sustained engagement. If her counterparts in Pyongyang and Washington can show the same, they might stop reliving history and nudge it instead in a better direction. ■