

2012: Turning point for the Korean peninsula?

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Synopsis

The end of 2011 saw the death of Kim Jong Il and the succession of his son Kim Jong Un. During 2012 there will be elections in South Korea (for the National Assembly and for the presidency), and in Russia, China, and the United States. We are embarking on a period of change, perhaps of convulsion. Elections aside, we can expect an on-going crisis in the European Union and a deterioration in relations between the United States and China and Russia. The Korean peninsula remains a fissure line, especially between the United States and China.

However, what happens in Korea in 2012 and beyond is a product of the past, and particularly the administration of Lee Myung-bak. Lee's hardline policy towards the North brought the peninsula to the brink of war at the end of 2010. In particular his exploitation of the accidental sinking of the *Cheonan* and the apparent fabrication of evidence to implicate North Korea brought a state of tension that nearly ignited in November 2010 when, in violation of the agreement signed by Kim Jong Il and his predecessor Roh Moo-hyun in 2007 planning a 'Zone for Peace and Cooperation' the South Korean military conducted provocative live fire exercises in disputed waters off the North Korean coast. The role of the South Korean (and US) military in initiating these inflammatory exercises, and what it could tell us about the balance of power between the presidency and military, is unexplored territory which no one seems to write about.

It would appear that Lee's *nordpolitik* was based on the premise that increased pressure and tension would produce a crisis in North Korea leading to a collapse that could be utilised to reunify the country by force. This did not happen for a number of reasons. China, and Russia, in their different ways, moved to preserve stability on the peninsula and China, in particular, made it clear that it would not tolerate an invasion of the North. This should be set against increased tension between them and the United States over issues such as US policies over Libya, Syria, Iran, and missile defense. US aggressiveness elsewhere in the world made China and Russia more resolute over Korea.

Despite sanctions and constant military threat North Korea proved resilient. While the food situation remained dire it did improve. Increased exports to China allowed for an increase in imports

of food and fertiliser which in turn helped boost the autumn harvest. Other parts of the economy moved ahead strongly. Investment from Egypt's Orascom brought about completion of the giant Ryugyong hotel and subscribers to its mobile phone service passed the one million mark. Lee Myung-bak had attempted to cut off trade, investment, and tourism links with the North, but the results were disappointing. For domestic political reasons he was unable to close down the Kaesong Industrial Park, a South Korea processing enclave in North Korea, which continued to grow. North Korea turned to China for trade, which increased some 75% and for tourists – one million of whom visited the Mt Paektu resort on the border.

Although some commentators claim, as they have done for the last two decades, that North Korea's collapse is just around the corner, there is no reason to believe this. On the contrary, Kim Jong Un's youthful energy and extrovert personality may be infusing new vigour.

Meanwhile Lee Myung-bak is racked by a disintegrated party (which changed its name to the New World Party in a futile attempt to escape its past), corruption scandals and economic difficulties, which are compounded by his pro-Americanism; the free trade agreement with the United States arouses a lot of opposition and compliance with US sanctions against Iran would be very damaging to the economy. In addition he is a lame duck president, by the constitution he leaves office in February 2013, so his prestige and freedom of movement is quite constrained.

At this stage it looks as if the progressives will win the legislative and presidential elections but even if the conservative front runner, Park Geun-hye (daughter of the former dictator Park Chung-hee) does win it is almost certain there will be a change in policy towards the North, leading back to some form of engagement. That had limited success during the administration of the two previous (progressive) presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. The Bush administration was hostile. Kim Jong Il was, understandably, suspicious and slow to react.

What will 2013 bring? We can expect continuity from both China and Russia. They will support anything which promotes stability on the Korean peninsula (and limit American influence). The US is more difficult to read. A second term Obama may be more restrained and more willing to accept a Seoul-led engagement policy. A Republican president is likely to be more aggressive and adventurist. In any case it will be the relationship with China that will be paramount. If Washington fears that opposing a South Korean policy of engagement and peace with the North will drive Seoul towards Beijing, then it may well decide that the best course of action is to do the same.

This, in turn, means that Pyongyang's reaction to changes in Seoul are vitally important. If it does not respond positively, or does not respond quickly enough to get the engagement process underway – there is obviously a large amount of reciprocity involved in confidence building – then a great opportunity will be lost. However if it welcomes, even anticipates, a South Korean spring then things could move quite fast. Much will depend on Kim Jong Un, his own inclinations and his power within the system both of which are at this stage unknown. By the end of the year we may well have a better idea. In addition, the example of Lee Myung-bak's hardline policy will be an incentive for both governments to re-engage.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the scope for unilateral changes by North Korea are very limited. For instance people often ask whether North Korea will follow the Chinese road to opening to trade and investment. In fact North Korea started on that road, attempting to build economic linkages

with the West, in the early 1970s. However, whereas China had considerable leverage, primarily as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union, and so could get the Americans to lift their embargo, North Korea has a far weaker hand. The US stranglehold on North Korea is still in place and while it is, expanding trade and investment, except with China, is severely curtailed. Getting that stranglehold removed is no easy matter but South Korea can play a crucial role. That is an added reason why changes in South Korean policy are critical.

So 2012 is likely to lay the foundations for a very different 2013 on, and around, the Korean peninsula. Good or bad we don't know, but there are grounds for optimism.

A year of consequence

The beginning of 2012 would seem to be an appropriate time to take stock of the situation on the Korean peninsula, analysing what has happened in the recent past, and looking ahead to the forthcoming year. Whilst the focus might be on Korea, the field of vision must be much wider. The Korean peninsula does not exist in isolation; on the contrary it is one of the main fissure points in the global geopolitical system – the place where the United States, China, Russia, and Japan connect and contest. So Korea must be placed within this geopolitical context.

At first sight it might appear that it is the death of Kim Jong Il, and the succession of his son Kim Jong Un, that makes this the time for an assessment. That is certainly the prevailing opinion in official circles and the media. However, for reasons which will be explained, the transition in North Korea is, *at the moment*, of minor importance. Of more consequence is the unfolding political situation in South Korea as well as the New Cold War on the global stage. The drama of the sudden death of Kim Jong Il should not divert us from looking back at the dynamics of the last few years, nor looking forward to what we can expect in 2012 and beyond.

2012 is set to be a year of consequence, both scheduled and unscheduled, in the domestic life of the major players and hence in global geopolitics. There are constitutionally scheduled elections in South Korea, The United States, China, and Russia. There may well be a change of government in Japan, but that has been a frequent occurrence in recent years and appears to make little difference.

Not much change is expected in either Russia or China. The conventional wisdom is that Vladimir Putin will win the presidency and whilst it is thought that he will take an increasingly strong line against the US, determined to a large extent by America's unashamedly anti-Putin, anti-Russia, stance this will not mark a major new departure in Russian foreign policy.¹ What is perhaps new in Russia is the resurgence of the Communist Party – the biggest winners in the parliamentary elections on 4 December 2011- though what effect this will have is yet unclear.² While there is undoubtedly a strong anti-Putin movement in Russia, this appears to be fuelled by anger over corruption and other domestic problems, rather than foreign policy. The irony, of course, is that the United States, which seems to be the main foreign funder of the protest movement (itself arguably a form of corruption) is not so much concerned about domestic matters, but Russia's resurgence on the world stage.³

In China it is anticipated that a 'fifth generation' leadership will be elected at the Communist Party 18th Congress in October 2012, with Xi Jinping widely expected to succeed Hu Jintao.⁴ It would be a surprise if there were surprises. The new generation will no doubt develop fresh initiatives but continuity will surely be the overriding theme. This is because for China, as for other countries

challenging or impeding in one way or another America's hegemony, it is the United States that sets the agenda. China, under Xi Jinping or under Hu Jintao wants China to have a 'peaceful rise' and will be careful not to antagonise the United States or give pretext for conflict. There are limits, and we have seen China becoming increasingly less willing to be pushed around.⁵ China will probably become more assertive under Xi as the balance of power moves, but for the moment it will be mainly a matter of reacting to US moves.

Then there is the United States itself and its 2012 presidential elections. This will be much written about over the coming months but there is a real question whether it will make much difference. At the time of writing it seems that it will be a contest between Barack Obama as incumbent and either Mitt Romney or Newt Gingrich. Obama as second term president may be marginally different to Obama as first term president, seeking re-election, but surely not as different as Obama the president from Obama the candidate.⁶ Either Romney or Gingrich would be cause for concern and both of them are likely to be a bit more adventurist, but it is unlikely that the changes will be marked. The bravado of the election campaign may well be tempered by the realities of office; they talk of attacking Iran but if in power they might, one would hope, dither as much as Obama.⁷ That is, if he doesn't beat them to the gun. Apart from beating the patriot drum loudly neither seem to have any new ideas.

For instance, Romney's foreign policy manifesto 'An American Century: A Strategy to Secure America's Enduring Interests and Ideals' says this about North Korea:

North Korea's nuclear weapons program is a serious menace to world peace. A nuclear weapons capability in the hands of an unpredictable dictator like Kim Jong-Il or his eventual successor poses a direct threat to U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere in East Asia, threatens our close allies South Korea and Japan, destabilizes the entire Pacific region, and could lead to the illicit transfer of a nuclear device to another rogue nation or a terrorist group. As president, Mitt Romney will commit to eliminating North Korea's nuclear weapons and its nuclear weapons infrastructure. A key mistake in U.S. policy toward North Korea has been to grant it a series of carrots in return for only illusory cooperation. Each step the world has taken toward North Korea has been met with further provocations and expansion of its nuclear program. Over the years, North Korea has found that its pursuit of a nuclear weapon reaps it material and diplomatic rewards, taking away any incentive for it to end its program. Mitt Romney will reverse that dynamic..⁸

This may be nonsense, but it is essentially indistinguishable from Obama's policy. However, both Romney and Gingrich are different from Obama in two important ways. They are both Republicans and they are both white. This opens up the possibility, admittedly slight, that they might 'do a Nixon'. Richard Nixon, it will be remembered, was able to make a deal with China, outflanking the Soviet Union, precisely because he was a Republican with a firm anti-Communist record.⁹ It would have been much more difficult for a Democrat to have done that. In the United States negotiation is often equated with appeasement. Obama has the added disadvantage of being America's first 'black president' so he is doubly constrained. If there was a change in US strategy and it was decided that a deal with North Korea was desirable it would be much easier for either Romney or Gingrich to pull it off against the inevitable cries of appeasement. There are two ways that might conceivably come about. It might be decided that, as perhaps with Myanmar, that normal relations, rather than adversarial ones, with a state on China's periphery is a better way of containing China. Or, and this is more likely, a change in Seoul might convince Washington that a new strategy was required.

The one election that might conceivably result in real change is in South Korea. As discussed below, Lee Myung-bak is deeply unpopular and the government party, the Grand National Party (GNP)¹⁰ is in disarray. Elections are to be held for the National Assembly in April and for the Presidency in December. The Presidency is for a single five-year term so Lee Myung-bak must relinquish office and the new President will assume office on 25 February 2013. The Lee Myung-bak administration has been marked by a hardline policy towards the North and while the 2012 elections will be mainly about economics, the *nordpolitik* will be an issue that distinguishes the candidates from each other, and from Lee Myung-bak.¹¹ There is a possibility that Lee will engineer an incident – what the Koreans call a ‘North Wind’ and what is known in the United States as an ‘October surprise’ – to inflame anti-North sentiment and bolster support for the conservatives.¹² However, to the degree that Lee’s relationship with the presumed conservative candidate, Park Geun-hye, are bad this is perhaps unlikely. Nevertheless there is no lessening of the buildup of tension on, and around the peninsula. For instance, in early February forthcoming US-ROK military exercises hit the news again:

North Korea lashed out at South Korea and the United States Saturday, warning that their upcoming joint military exercises would further escalate tension on the Korean Peninsula.
South Korea and the U.S. plan to jointly stage major military maneuvers, called Key Resolve, from Feb. 27 to March 9, with about 200,000 South Korean and 2,100 U.S. troops participating.
Separately, the allies plan to hold the Foal Eagle joint military exercise from March 1 to April 30. **The Marines of two countries will also hold a joint landing exercise in March, the largest of its kind in 23 years.** [emphasis added].¹³

Park Geun-hye, for her part, is anxious to dissociate herself from the unpopular Lee, and his disastrous *nordpolitik*.¹⁴

From a dangerous past to a more promising future

Lee Myung-bak’s policy took the Korean peninsula to the brink of war in 2010. By mid-2011 its failure became apparent, and the danger of conflict receded somewhat. The failure was manifested by the resilience of North Korea and its turning towards China, and the firm, stabilising actions of China and Russia. The death of Kim Jong Il in December 2011 confirmed the stability of North Korea. At the same time Lee was entering his last year of office, becoming a lame duck president, and attention was increasingly focussed on his succession. A gloomy economic forecast, continuing corruption scandals, the unpopularity of the president, and the ruling party, all suggest that 2012 will be a year of sweeping change in South Korea. However, President Lee remains in office until February 2013, and whilst his political position may be undercut, he still has executive power and there may be convulsions in inter-Korean relations yet. It seems certain that whoever wins the presidency in December 2012, there will be a return to a policy of engagement with the North in 2013, and there is a good chance of a positive response from the government of Kim Jong Un.

To the brink of war

At the end of 2010 and into 2011 there is no doubt that the situation on the Korean peninsula was very tense. The furore over the sinking of the South Korean navy ship *Cheonan* in March 2010 and the artillery exchange at Yeonpyeong Island in November brought war closer than it had been for decades. It appears that the *Cheonan* sunk by accident, probably after having activated a South Korean mine. Had this happened during the administration of Roh Moo-hyun we might have expected an outcome that did not produce a crisis. With Lee it was different. A military-led

investigation, with some token 'international' input from friendly countries, notably the US, fastened blame on North Korea even going to the lengths, it seems, of fabricating evidence. It is uncertain whether the Yeonpyeong incident, which was ignited by South Korean firing into contested waters off the North Korea coast, was a deliberate provocation, or something which got out of hand.¹⁵

The American scholar Robert Oppenheim expressed a common opinion when he wrote that events had 'arguably moved the peninsula closer to "the brink" at the end of 2010 than it had been for some time.'¹⁶ There may be disagreement over the interpretation of events, and particularly over causality and motivation, but few informed observers doubted the seriousness of the situation. High tension extended at least to mid-2011, as exemplified by the bizarre incident in June when South Korean marines, 'Made Trigger Happy by Inter-Korean tensions' attempted to shoot down a South Korean airliner landing at Incheon airport.¹⁷ Since then there has been a certain easing of tension, on the surface at least, and the danger of war seems to have receded somewhat. However, the fissure lines remain and it is important to recognise them, and to analyse why the situation has eased.

The fissure lines –which are in effect the contradiction between the objectives and motivations of the main powers, and actors, involved are discussed in detail in my book *Crisis in Korea* but a brief overview might be helpful. Documentation is in the book so will be kept to a minimum here.

When Lee Myung-bak succeeded Roh Moo-hyun as President of the Republic of Korea, assuming office in February 2008, he brought in a distinctly different, hardline, policy towards North Korea. Ostensibly this was intended to bring about a change in North Korea's policy and particularly persuade it to denuclearise in exchange for aid and 'security guarantees' – the so-called 'grand bargain'.¹⁸ Lee is an intelligent man and it is unlikely that he believed this; if North Korea does denuclearise it will be as the result of carefully negotiated guarantees from the US, not on the basis of promises from South Korea. The president of the Republic of Korea cannot speak for the president of the United States. Rather it seems that he calculated that increased pressure on the North might produce a crisis, perhaps a collapse, that would provide an opportunity and excuse for the South to take over the North, and for the Americans to support the invasion that would be required. There seems no reason to suppose that there were firm plans, but rather a strategy of keeping up the pressure, seeing what happened, and reacting to it. In particular, an invasion could only go ahead if two vital criteria were met. Since an invasion could only take place with American support, Washington would have to be convinced that the criteria were fulfilled, and not have too much on its plate elsewhere. American approval is crucial for both for legal and operational reasons.¹⁹

Criteria for invasion

The first criterion was that there must be sufficient disarray in the North for it to be calculated that there would not be much opposition to military intervention. This, after all, has been the assumption behind the American invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya (of which more in a moment).

The second criterion was that the Chinese would not intervene and would accept the South absorbing the North, just as the Soviet Union had accepted West Germany swallowing up the East. One of the constant themes of the Lee administration, the right-wing South Korea media, and many American commentators is that China would tolerate a takeover and might even help out. This, for instance, was the thrust of a conversation between then-South Korean vice foreign minister, Chun

Yung-woo, and US ambassador to South Korea, Kathleen Stephens, revealed by WikiLeaks.²⁰ Whether the Americans were so gullible to accept what was so clearly South Korea spin is unknown, but improbable.²¹ In any case, subsequent developments should have disabused them of such illusions, and this seems to have happened.

There is a caveat about this second criterion, because it is likely that there are US strategists who argue that a conflict with China is inevitable, so the sooner the better, and what better place than Korea where the US can utilise the formidable military might not merely of South Korea, but more so of Japan. Just as the Soviets were lured into Afghanistan in the late 1970s so a latter-day Brzezinski might well calculate that Korea would be the place to give China a bloody nose. Of course, such arguments are not expressed openly and if the US does go to war with China over Korea in the immediate future it will be because it has been manipulated into it, or has stumbled into crisis, not because of conscious, high level, strategic decision. Ten years' time things may be different but for the moment strong warning signals from Beijing, if they are understood, will deter US intervention.

Positions and Policies

After he came to office President Lee took various steps to increase tension with the North. Perhaps the most symbolic of the early moves was the suspension of tours to Kumgangsan, the mountain resort in North Korea which had been so popular with Southern tourists.²² Here, as with most notably the *Cheonan* incident in 2010, Lee took advantage of circumstances to generate friction. There is a strong element of opportunism, or pragmatic flexibility whichever you prefer, in the strategy. This is an important, and fortunate, characteristic of his strategic policy. If circumstances cease to become propitious to attain the original objective, then he segues into policy change with no loss of face.

Lee Myung-bak was the principal actor in bringing the Korean peninsula to the brink of war in 2010, the leaders of the other main countries involved – North Korea, China, Russia, the US, and Japan – were secondary in that they were reacting to his moves. For the first three that was mainly because they wanted to preserve the status quo, the preservation of North Korea. The US and Japan were, in their different ways, desirous of change and were willing to accept Lee's initiatives.

North Korea – seeking peaceful coexistence

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, North Korea's position and policies are relatively easy to discern and describe. Battered by 60 odd years of US-led sanctions and military threat it is a poor, weak, and vulnerable country. Though there are many positive signs in the economy – mobile phone sales have soared, there is a building boom in Pyongyang and signs of progress in the special economic zones on the borders with China and Russia – it faces a huge uphill task to rehabilitate and develop its economy.²³ The agricultural sector, devastated by shortage of fertiliser and other inputs, is not able to produce sufficient food.²⁴ There were encouraging reports in early 2012 that because of increased imports of fertiliser from China, the harvest had increased markedly and the food supply was much better.²⁵ Nevertheless, the situation remains on the knife edge.²⁶ With export revenues severely hampered by sanctions it is unable to import enough fertilisers and foodstuffs, and what food it does import is low end and unpalatable.²⁷ This means North Korea's primary foreign policy objective is somehow to get the US to drop its policy of 'hostility', lift sanctions and accept peaceful coexistence. Its military hardware is far inferior to that of South Korea, let alone the United States (and Japan). No one seriously suggests that there is any possibility of North Korea

defeating and overrunning the South as it did in 1950 and even the North only talks of counterattack –turning Seoul into a sea of flames – in the event of war:

If the aggressors launch provocation for a "local war" the world will witness unprecedented all-out counteraction on the part of the army and people of the DPRK. It will also see such merciless counteraction as engulfing Seoul in sea of flames, whereby to smash every move for confrontation with unimaginable strategy and tactics.²⁸

There is no doubt that in the event of a conflict the US/South Korean forces would prevail, although at what cost, and how long it would take, is another matter. A Chinese intervention would transform the conflict, but it would be a matter of preventing a North Korean defeat rather than facilitating a North Korean victory.

The International Crisis Group is stating the obvious when it writes:

The balance of power has shifted against Pyongyang, and the DPRK leadership is not likely to start a war it knows it would lose.²⁹

Actually the balance of power shifted back in 1950 when the US made it evident that it would not relinquish its position on the Korean peninsula and since then there has been little likelihood that the North would start a war. As the South has got stronger, and the North has been enfeebled by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the period of unchallenged US hegemony that followed for some time, the question has not been whether the North would invade the South, but whether the South would invade the North. This question has become more insistent since Lee Myung-bak came to power. Seoul invariably ascribes incidents to Pyongyang's 'provocations', and this is echoed by Washington, its subordinate states, and by most of the international media. However, it is apparent that if anyone is to gain from engineering a provocation it is the South not the North.

Given its vulnerability, North Korea must walk a thin line between, on the one hand, not giving the South excuse or reason to attack and displaying strength and resolution on the other. This was demonstrated in particular in the Yeonpyeong incident of November 2011.³⁰

United States – containing China and disciplining South Korea

The American position has been curious. The underlying strategic thrust has been the containment of China and this has involved the strengthening of the alliances with South Korea and Japan (as well as with subordinate allies further afield such as Australia). Tension on the Korean peninsula enhances these alliances. However at the same time the US faces the classic hegemonic problem of not giving clients too much leash. Many observers saw the US response to Korean events in 2010 of a case of the 'tail wagging the dog'.³¹ This seems to have become a characteristic of the Obama administration as evidenced by the leading roles given to subordinates such as France and Qatar in the Libyan adventure. It was France which played the main role in the foreign intervention, and it appears that it was a French airstrike which led to Gaddafi's capture and killing.³² This policy is arguably a reaction to the 'unilateralism' of the Bush administration.³³ This policy of leading from behind has its advantages – virtually no US casualties for one thing – but it does mean that the US loss of direct control may result in all sorts of unintended consequences. The role of Qatar in facilitating, arming, and financing jihadists in Libya is a case in point.³⁴

If Libya turns sour for the US – if the resistance resurfaces, if the *jihadists* assume control, if there is an unseemly squabble over the booty, , or if the US military and corporations are unhappy with their share (it is unlikely that the French, having done the dirty work, will happily cede to the Americans) –

then there may well be a reassessment, which will have implications for US policy globally, but not least in Korea

China, Russia, Japan

China and Russia share a common objective of reserving peace and stability in Korea. For both of them South Korea is an important economic partner (and much more valuable than the North) but ultimately it is geopolitical considerations that count more. If there is war then economic benefits disappear anyway. Neither want the American empire to add another scalp to its belt. North Korea is of much more strategic importance to China (as 1950 showed) but neither would be indifferent to a direct US military presence on their border.

Dean Acheson's famous quip about Britain, that it had lost an empire but had not yet found a role could apply with even more force to Japan. Unable to break free from its client dependency on its conqueror, the United States, it is lurching down a road of confrontation with China and seeking full remilitarisation. The supposed 'North Korean threat', laced with racism, has become an indispensable ingredient of Japanese policy so it is more likely to pour oil, rather than water, on the flames.

Back from the brink

As tension started to mount in April 2010 when it became clear that the South Korean investigation into the sinking of the *Cheonan* would accuse North Korea the major countries involved (and in the case of the US, its 'friends' around the world) took two distinct and conflicting positions. The United States and Japan declared that they fully supported the South Korean position and the US ratcheted up its war exercises with the South.³⁵ The exercises had a dual role; to increase pressure on Pyongyang with a scarcely veiled threat that an invasion was imminent, and to warn China.³⁶

North Korea denied any involvement with the sinking of the *Cheonan*, and demanded to be allowed to send investigators; this was refused.³⁷ Neither China nor Russia had been invited to join the South Korean investigation although China, for one, had reportedly "proposed a joint investigation with the United States and the two Koreas".³⁸ Both China and Russia called for calm and refused to condemn North Korea in the absence of any convincing evidence.³⁹

It was predictable that both China and Russia would attempt to defuse the situation, stability on the Korean peninsula being their major objective. However they were both in a difficult position. South Korea was very much more important to them than North Korea and they did not want to offend Seoul. However, at the same time they could not allow South Korea to utilise the incident to exacerbate tensions and perhaps invade the North. They both took a position of 'impartiality', saying that they could not denounce North Korea, nor allow the United Nations Security Council to condemn it, without real evidence, rather than allegations.⁴⁰

In May 2010, Lee Myung-bak perhaps seeking to counter widespread scepticism in South Korea about the official verdict on the *Cheonan* pressed China and Russia to review the findings of his investigation team.⁴¹ To have been a part of the initial investigation would have been one thing, but to be put in a position where judgement had to be made solely on the basis of 'evidence' selected by the South Korea military was another. China was in a position to refuse, but Russia, perhaps because of its large debt to South Korea, accepted the request to send a team of investigators.⁴²

As readers of *Crisis in Korea* will know, Lee appears to have been over confident in his leverage over Medvedev. Publically the Russians claimed that their investigation was 'inconclusive'.⁴³ The report was released to the US and Chinese governments but not to South Korea (nor presumably the North) and it was never published.⁴⁴ The South Korean government was angry that Russia had not endorsed its guilty verdict, but it seems they would have been even more disconcerted had the Russian assessment been made public. Donald Gregg, former Bush Senior ambassador to South Korea and chairman emeritus of the Korea Society revealed why in an article in the *International Herald Tribune* :

When I asked a well-placed Russian friend why the report has not been made public, he replied, "Because it would do much political damage to President Lee Myung-bak and would embarrass President Obama."⁴⁵

The reasons for the damage and embarrassment became clear when the results of the Russian investigation were leaked to the South Korean newspaper *Hankyoreh* in July 2010. The Russian team concluded that the *Cheonan* probably sunk after accidentally detonating a South Korean mine, and that the torpedo remnant produced by South Korea was not responsible for the sinking. Moreover they noted that the torpedo had been under water for much more than the two months that elapsed between the sinking of the *Cheonan* in March and the claimed 'recovery' of the remnant in April.⁴⁶

The various governments involved reacted to the Russian findings (which largely corroborated doubts expressed by South Koreans at home and in North America) in different ways.

The New Cold War

Neither Russia nor China publically condemned South Korea for fabricating evidence in order to incriminate North Korea and ignite tension on the peninsula. However, their subsequent actions indicate that they were aware of the dynamics and sought, in their different ways, to defuse the situation. In addition, the United States was becoming ever more confrontational, not merely in East Asia but globally. For instance, apart from on-going naval exercises in waters off the Chinese coast, Secretary Clinton tried, with some success, to fuel anti-Chinese sentiments at the Asia Regional Forum in Hanoi in July 2010.⁴⁷ The US encouraged Japan in its territorial squabble with China over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.⁴⁸ Secretary Clinton has taken a very aggressive position and has declared that we are entering 'America's Pacific Century', and that 'The future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action.'⁴⁹ There has been increasing discussion in the US media about possible conflict with China.⁵⁰ Significantly, the influential RAND corporation, in a report released in October 2011 concluded that the most likely trigger for a conflict between the US and China would be a collapse of North Korea and its invasion by the South, and the US.⁵¹

Further afield the de facto invasion of Libya, on-going deliberations about invading Iran, and musing about accomplishing regime change in Syria, amongst other moves, have brought about what is increasingly seen as a 'New Cold War'.⁵² The use of the veto by China and Russia, something very rare in recent years, to block US resolutions on Syria in the Security Council in October 2011 marks a new stage in the confrontation between the major powers.⁵³

Paradoxically perhaps, the hardline, arguably adventurist, North Korea policy of Lee Myung-bak set against the United States increasingly confrontational stance has hardened the position of Russia and China on Korea.

China

After the *Cheonan* incident Kim Jong Il visited China four times (May 2010, August 2010, May 2011, and August 2011 on his return from Russia). The Western media tends to couch these visits (and the one to Russia) in terms of Korean initiatives, but that is only part of the story. As with Lee's visits to the United States it also tells us something about relations between the two countries involved. There is, after all, a long queue of politicians anxious to meet the leaders of the super powers.⁵⁴ The frequency of Kim's visits, and the apparent warmth with which he has been received, suggests that China wants to signal where it stands in the post-Cheonan situation. Kim has not been the only one making visits; for instance DPRK Premier Choe Yong Rim went to Shanghai in September 2011 and Chinese Vice Premier Li Keqiang was in Pyongyang the following month.⁵⁵ The latter visit, incidentally, provided an interesting example of media spin. The Associated Press story on his visit, which claimed to be based on reports from the official Chinese news agency Xinhua, was headlined in the *Washington Post*:

Chinese leader urges ally North Korea to improve ties with US, South Korea⁵⁶

The actual Xinhua article gave a very different version:

He [Li Keqiang] said China supported the DPRK's efforts in improving the external environment as well as the U.S.-DPRK dialogue, the improvement of North-South relations and the resumption of the Six-Party Talks, adding China would also strive to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeastern Asia⁵⁷.

Trade and economic cooperation between China and the DPRK has increased greatly with trade nearly doubling in the first 7 months of 2011.⁵⁸ There have also been important developments on the Special Economic Zones on the DPRK border with China in the west (Hwanggumphyong and Wihwa Islands in the Amnok/Yalu near Dandong) and with China and Russia in the East (Rason).⁵⁹ Whilst the media focuses on illegal emigration, the number of North Koreans legally visiting China for work, business, or family visits, was 110,000 in the first 9 months of 2011, 30% more than the whole of 2010.⁶⁰ It is clear that there is an underlying element of mutuality in these economic developments. The benefits and motivations may be unequal – the Hwanggumphyong SEZ seems to offer more to the DPRK than it does to China, and much of the impetus for the increase in trade, and FDI, derives from Lee Myung-bak's policy. As he has cut off economic cooperation with the North so the DPRK has, probably reluctantly, turned more to China.⁶¹ However, the fact that China has responded goes beyond economics into politics.

Politics was very much to the fore in July 2011 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Sino-DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance signed in July 1961. For many years external observers had concluded that this treaty, though never formally abrogated, had been allowed to wither and no longer had any force. For instance, Andrew Scobell writing in 2003, claimed that:

China and North Korea are technically allies, bound by a 1961 treaty to come to each other's aid in the event of war. Their defense relationship might more accurately be described as a "virtual alliance": Beijing has made clear

to Pyongyang since the mid-1990s that China will not come to North Korea's aid if Kim Jong Il finds himself in trouble.⁶²

Just how an American academic got to know what the Chinese leadership said in private to Kim Jong Il is unclear, and it is probably no more than the elevation of convenient rumour and prevailing opinion into established fact. However, there has been a lot of cross-cultural misunderstanding with the Americans wanting explicit 'facts' and the Chinese preferring Confucian vagueness. Alan Romberg, who regards the 'lips and teeth', let alone an alliance, between the two countries as a 'fiction', noted that:

When the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman was asked in early June 2009 whether the 1961 PRC-DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance was still viable after the North's second nuclear test, the spokesman totally avoided any reference to the Treaty.⁶³

Indeed he did, not merely once as Romberg suggests, but twice:

Q: China and the DPRK signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in 1961. Is this Treaty still viable after the DPRK's nuclear test?

A: I'd like to stress that it serves the common interest of all parties to properly handle the issue through negotiations and dialogue, adhere to denuclearization on the Peninsula, safeguard peace and stability of the Peninsula and Northeast Asia and prevent the situation from escalating or getting out of control. Relevant countries should make unwavering efforts to that effect, and China will continue to play a constructive role in that area.

.....

Q: If the DPRK nuclear test lead to war on the Korean Peninsula, will China automatically join in the war according to the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance signed in 1961?

A: You seem to have asked this question earlier, and I remember I have already answered that.

If there are no more questions, thanks for coming! See you!⁶⁴

It would be unwise to read too much into this. If one goes through the whole transcript, and that of other briefings, one sees that the spokesperson is fielding questions from a generally hostile group of journalists. In the circumstances it is not surprising that the spokesperson is circumspect and often evasive.⁶⁵

China has taken care, not merely in respect of the Korean peninsula, but in its general dealings with the United States, to be conciliatory and not exacerbate tension. This attitude has been weakening, as China's strength vis-à-vis the US grows, but is yet likely to prevail to prevent, as far as possible, the US having reason, or excuse, to impede the 'peaceful rise'. However, within this general strategy, there are times when China signals its resolution. In October 2011 there was a stir when an editorial in the authoritative *Global Times* of Beijing warned 'Don't take peaceful approach for granted' and that 'If these countries don't want to change their ways with China, they will need to prepare for the sounds of cannons.'⁶⁶ 'These countries' referred, in theory, to the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam but since no small country would take on China in isolation, there was a veiled warning to the United States though this did not appear to surface in the mainstream media.⁶⁷

The July anniversary of the Treaty of Friendship offered China (and the DPRK) an opportunity to make a statement about the China-North Korea relationship and to issue a warning.

The *Global Times* ran a special article on 14 July 2011 giving the views of five 'experts' under the heading 'North Korean Treaty still in China's interests'.⁶⁸ Their views differed but the consensus was that the treaty remained valuable in deterring war on the peninsula.

Piao Jianyi of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was most explicit:

Bluntly, the major threat to the diplomatic relations among China and its neighboring nations will come from the US in the future decades. Direct Sino-US confrontation is rare. But we can see the hand of the US behind numerous issues, especially in the Korean Peninsula.

To abolish the agreement will convey a wrong message to the US and South Korea that China will never play any part on the peninsula. South Korea could therefore take a predominant role in uniting the two nations.

However, Seoul is not strong enough to quickly reunify the peninsula. The arrival of US military troops at the border of China and North Korea would put mounting pressures on China. They could have a great influence on social values in Northeast China.

Accordingly, the Treaty should be consolidated rather than be abolished. To some degree, the contract helps unnerve the US and South Korea.⁶⁹

The significance of the Chinese comments on the continuing validity of the treaty were noted in the South Korean press. The liberal *Hankyoreh* noted that:

The question of whether China will support North Korea militarily if war breaks out on the Korean Peninsula is once again becoming the topic of discussion. After being dismissed as a belief of the past, the question of China's automatic intervention on North Korea's behalf in a military conflict is being talked about as the signing of the two countries' friendship treaty marks its 50th anniversary. The development is both concerning and regrettable, and demonstrates just how troubling the political situation on and around the peninsula is becoming.

Article II of the Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, which marks its 50th anniversary today, states, "In the event of one of the Contracting Parties being subjected to the armed attack by any state or several states jointly and thus being involved in a state of war, the other Contracting Party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal."

This provision was dismissed as nothing more than a dead letter as the political situation changed after the Cold War and Seoul established diplomatic relations with Beijing. But circumstances have changed with the recent rise in tensions between North Korea and South Korea.⁷⁰

The right-wing *Chosun Ilbo* in its article of the celebration of the anniversary reported that:

South Korea's Institute for National Unification says the treaty is essentially a pledge that China will back the North in any military conflict.⁷¹

Curiously, and worryingly, discussion of the treaty did not seem to attract attention of the mainstream US media, or to have impinged on the consciousness of the policy elite. This was brought home by an interview in the authoritative North Korea-focused Washington journal *38 North* on 3 November in an article entitled 'The Security Challenges of North Korean Collapse: A Conversation with Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Lind'. Bennett and Lind have attracted some attention over the last year with their construction of 'post-collapse' scenarios. This was discussed in my book, and resurfaced in an article in the latest issue of the journal *International Security*.⁷² Their ideas are, to put it mildly, disquietingly bizarre and divorced from reality. The veteran (conservative) journalist Donald Kirk expressed some incredulity in a 2010 report on a seminar they gave:

"We don't envision large-scale organized resistance by the North Korean military," she told a meeting at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. Nor, said Lind, in what presumably was an understatement, should anyone "assume everyone in North Korea would welcome U.S. forces"....

Pressed to describe the legality of the deployment that she was suggesting, Lind acknowledged, "There's no getting around it, this is an invasion of North Korea" in which "we're sending military forces into a country that doesn't want you to come."....

Lind seemed to think that somehow it would be possible to "reassure China" that U.S. and South Korean forces were not there to challenge China.

It was as though the lessons of the Chinese role in the Korean War — and China's focus on insuring the stability of the North Korean regime against collapse — were no longer relevant.⁷³

The Bennett and Lind scenarios deserve a separate article, but here it is relevant to point out that the *38 North* interview with them in November 2011, after the July anniversary of the Mutual Assistance treaty, and 18 months of China's warming relationship with North Korea and deteriorating one with the South, and the US, did not seriously address the issue of a Chinese response to an invasion. There is, for instance, this astounding answer to a question that is not pursued:

Q: How would South Korea feel about Chinese intervention? What about the United States?

Lind: Many people believe that, in the event of instability in North Korea, the Chinese will move to stabilize their border—not just move to their border, but drop down into North Korea. Either way—if CFC [Combined Forces Command, i.e. the US military] wants China in, or if it doesn't want China in—this needs to be coordinated in advance. But ultimately Seoul and Washington may have no say whatsoever about Chinese involvement.⁷⁴

It as if the myopia of 1950, when Chinese warnings that they would intervene if the US pushed up to the Yalu were disregarded, is being repeated.

There have been a number of reports on increasingly military ties between China and North Korea. In August 2011 Jon Chang Bok, chief of the General Logistics Bureau visited Beijing and had a meeting with Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie.⁷⁵ This was followed in November 2011 when China sent 'a senior Chinese military delegation led by Director of the General Political Department of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Li Jinai' to Pyongyang where he had a meeting with Kim Jong Il. The result was a declaration that, in the words of Xinhua, 'China, DPRK vow to strengthen military cooperation'.⁷⁶

The Associated Press reported on the visit but did not position it as a specific response to the crisis in Korea but rather in general terms as a reaction to Obama's East Asia Summit foray which angered China⁷⁷:

Although Li's trip was likely planned in advance, recent remarks by President Barack Obama asserting the U.S. military's continuing presence in Asia have riled Beijing. Chinese government-backed scholars and state media say they see the strengthening of America's alliance's with the Philippines, Australia and others as a new form of encirclement aimed at blocking China's rising predominance in the region.⁷⁸

Again, it seems, warnings go unnoticed.

Russia

The Russian response to the crisis in Korea had basically the same objectives as that of China – to preserve peace and stability – but the mode was rather different, and more proactive.

The centrepiece was the summit between President Dmitry Medvedev and Chairman Kim Jong Il in the Eastern Siberian city of Ulan-Ude on 24 August 2011. Most commentators tended to focus on Kim Jong Il and see the meeting exclusively as a North Korea initiative.⁷⁹ Why North Korea wanted the summit, and improved relations with Russia, was obvious but the important aspect, often overlooked, is why Medvedev responded, and why he came out with specific proposals which went beyond the motherhood and apple pie component of the Six Party Talks.⁸⁰ Medvedev resurrected long-standing proposals to construct a gas pipeline through North Korea to the South, with possible onward connections to Japan.. Also on the agenda were associated proposals to regenerate the rail system so that South Korea, and perhaps Japan, could be linked with Europe via the Trans-Siberian

railway. A third component was the idea of exported Russian electricity through the North into South Korea. The economic implications of all this were huge but it was the political ones which were particularly apposite, and consequential. These three energy/transportation sinews would strengthen Russia's position in East Asia, somewhat to the detriment of China. They would diminish the value of shipping in comparison to transportation across the Eurasian landmass, and hence have implications for US superiority at sea. In addition, they would be a powerful inducement to preserve peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and it is likely that their reappearance at this time was a response to the crisis of 2010, and may well have gained added impetus from Russian annoyance at South Korea's attempt to utilise them in the fabrication of the *Cheonan* incident.⁸¹

Once installed, any disruption of any of these sinews would have dire consequences for both Koreas. Many commentators focussed on what they saw as the strategic advantage these connections would give the North, but that advantage was in fact illusory. North Korea could not lightly disrupt the transmission of gas, electricity, and trains, without doing immense economic, and political, damage to itself. Indeed, the damage would weigh more heavily on the North, with its far smaller economy, than on the South which in any case has alternative sources; the Russian gas pipeline would only supply 10% of its demand.⁸² The real constraint would be on South Korea whose economic, and political, wellbeing would be linked to that of the North in ways that it is not now. It is true that the Seoul stock market is effected by tension with the North, and its attractiveness for foreign capital is diminished by any crisis, but the economies are disarticulated. The South has been insulated from the North and while sanctions may have impacted greatly on the North Korean economy, and impoverished its people, this is not felt in the South. Increased economic linkages would change that. Moreover, since any war is likely to spring from the strong South rather than the weak North, the economic bonds would be more of a constraint on Seoul than Pyongyang. All this puts the South Korean government, and especially a hardline one such as that of Lee Myung-bak, in an awkward position. The pipeline, and other links, cannot be openly opposed, but the dangers and difficulties can be stressed. This was evident in President Lee's summit with Medvedev on 1 November 2011.⁸³ The pipeline (and railway) proposal has been around for some 20 years but whether the Russians will be successful this time is uncertain, even unlikely. The United States has no love for such projects, which enhance Russian and limit American leverage.⁸⁴ Washington cannot openly oppose something which is to the economic benefit of the South Korean people any more than the government in Seoul, but both will find impediments. One bright light for the United States however, is that the opening of the South Korean and Japanese markets to Russian gas will disadvantage China in its price negotiations with Russia. Similarly, connecting South Korea and Japan to Europe via the Trans-Siberian Railway would have negative implications for China.

Apart from helping preserve peace the implementation of the Russian proposals would be a significant step towards real, consensual reunification of the Korean peninsula. That is very different from what is envisaged by Lee Myung-bak, the South Korean right, and their foreign supporters. When Lee talks of reunification he means a takeover of the North and its absorption into the South. Peaceful reunification on the other hand would build on the benefits of cooperation between the two Koreas- in economics, business, culture, sports, and security – so that a consensus developed in both parts for closer political accommodation.

The other main development arising from the Kim-Medvedev summit was the announcement of joint search and rescue exercises.⁸⁵ Although this had no practical importance –the projected

exercise was very small beer compared with the mammoth US-ROK exercises that had been a feature of the peninsula for decades - and was merely symbolic it still drew objections from the US.⁸⁶ The Russian scholar, Alexander Vorontsov pointed out that:

It seems that Western analysts deliberately ignore the fact that the planned Russia-DPRK naval exercises are a small scale effort, purely humanitarian in nature, with no armaments involved, while the armed forces of the US and South Korea routinely run joint exercises, in many cases in direct proximity of North Korea's borders, with tens of thousands of servicemen using massive arsenals that include artillery and missiles firing. It is very difficult to understand the logic by which the former case is a threat to stability on the Korean peninsula, and the latter—militant games of much greater proportions played by the US and ROK, which culminated in inter-Korean clashes last year—is a contribution to stability.⁸⁷

Similar exercises between South Korea and Russia, or China, do not attract US rebukes.⁸⁸

However, the symbolism was important. As recently as June 2010 the Russian ambassador to Seoul had gone out of his way to say that Russia and North Korea were not allies.⁸⁹

United States

US foreign policy, and the role of political leaders in formulating it, is an enduring mystery as the current candidates for the 2012 presidential election amply testify.⁹⁰ We know that hostility towards, and fear of, China is shared across most of the political spectrum but how this is articulated in Korea policy is another matter. It seems that Obama, who has a limited interest in foreign affairs (he is not unusual, virtually all American politicians privilege the domestic) has been, until recently at least, been occupied with problems in the greater Middle East and has given little attention to East Asia. He has been content to have US Korea policy driven out of Seoul.⁹¹ Not very wise, since Korea policy is ultimately China policy and it is surely imprudent to have a client regime have so much influence over your relationship with your major adversary. To be sure, there have been some indications of US restraining South Korea, but these have been marginal.⁹² Ultimately of course there is no doubt who calls the shots and a constant fear of South Korean governments is of being 'side-lined' if the United States needs to choose between it and Japan, or China.⁹³ And if the US decides to do a peace deal with North Korea, which would probably be because it calculates it would be better able to handle China that way, then South Korean protests would be brushed aside.⁹⁴ No doubt Secretary Clinton's opening to Myanmar, clearly part of the China containment strategy, will be scrutinised in Seoul to see if there any suggestions that Washington will do something similar in Korea.⁹⁵ The more astute American analysis have advocated that for years, but it is unlikely to happen.⁹⁶

For their part North Korea and China tend to focus on the US as the dominant partner in the relationship and to underestimate the role that Seoul can, and does, play. For instance, in November 2011 the South Korean government announced that it was building barracks for US troops on Baengnyeong Island, one of the islands along the North Limit Line (NLL) and the site of the sinking of the *Cheonan*.⁹⁷ The move was easy to interpret. Not merely was it a provocative action designed to stoke tension on the volatile West Sea boundary area – Baengnyeong lies just off the North Korea coast in waters claimed by the North – but it was a transparent attempt to lock the US into a likely crisis. If American troops were on the island and an incident occurred which led to fighting, easy enough to organise, and this resulted in American casualties, then this might well precipitate a US attack on the DPRK, which would incorporate a South Korean attempt to take over the North, and probably lead to war with China. Whether the US will fall into the trap of stationing

troops on Baengnyeong is yet to be seen, but the affair does seem to be a South Korean initiative in contrast to the big naval base on Jeju island which, which despite denials from Seoul, is more likely to have been an American idea, part of the strategy of containing China.⁹⁸ It is difficult to see the Baengnyeong project as anything other than a South Korean tactic to embroil the US but the *People's Daily* article on the plan was headlined 'US to open new military base in S Korea'.⁹⁹

There is one area in which Washington has not need for prodding from Seoul and that is refusing to negotiate with Pyongyang, and to return to the Six Party Talks in Beijing. This is done simply by insisting on preconditions which have to be met by the other side before negotiations can begin. Since the preconditions are in fact the subject of the negotiations this effectively prevents talks taking place. North Korea, Russia, and China want the Six Party Talks to recommence without preconditions.¹⁰⁰ The United States and South Korea insist on preconditions.¹⁰¹ American refusal to return to the Six Party Talks probably owes as much to a decision that the Beijing negotiations have given China a diplomatic status in East Asia that the Bush administration was foolish to give in its eagerness to avoid bilateral negotiations with North Korea.

One interesting twist to these manoeuvrings, and a further illustration of Washington's putting itself in Seoul's hands, is the American insistence on an improvement in North-South relations before it will engage in bilateral talks with North Korea. That in turn, Seoul has been saying (though there has been a softening of late, as discussed below) depends on Pyongyang apologising for the sinking of the *Cheonan*. Since it is virtually certain that North Korea did not sink the *Cheonan* (and Lee Myung-bak must know that) this gives the government in Seoul a stranglehold on US-DPRK relations.¹⁰² On the other hand, since the US has no intention of negotiations, putting the onus on the Koreans for the stalemate has its attractions.

An intriguing illustration of the American reluctance to achieve a resolution of the nuclear issue with North Korea was given in September by a Japanese report of a renewed offer by North Korea to sell nuclear fuel rods to South Korea, and the South's refusal reportedly because of an agreement with the US not to negotiate the nuclear issue on its own.¹⁰³ On previous occasions when this issue surfaced it had been described as an important part of the disarmament process:

South Korea is considering purchasing unused reactor fuel rods from North Korea as part of efforts to help the North disable its nuclear facilities in Yongbyon, a senior diplomat said Thursday. Discussions are to be held to ship out the monitored unused reactor fuel rods at the forthcoming six-party talks aimed at abolishing North Korea's nuclear weapons program, the official said on condition of anonymity. North Korea has completed 8 out of 11 steps to disable its plutonium-producing Yongbyon nuclear weapons facilities under a disarmament-for-aid deal reached last year, he said. The remaining steps are discharging spent fuel rods, extracting the running gear of the control rod and shipping out unused fuel rods, he added.¹⁰⁴

The continued refusal is curious since, according to the US nuclear disarmament think tank Nautilus Institute,

The purchase of these rods would prevent them from being reprocessed to bolster the DPRK's nuclear arsenal.¹⁰⁵

A further indication to the Obama administration lack of interest in entering into substantial negotiations with Pyongyang (as opposed to meetings for public relations purposes¹⁰⁶) has been the recent downgrading of the status of its 'North Korea envoy' when Ambassador Stephen Bosworth,

former US ambassador to the ROK, was replaced by Glyn Davies. Davies does not have ambassadorial status but is merely 'a respected foreign service officer who has spent much of his career focusing on Europe, but from 2007 to 2009 he served as principal deputy assistant secretary in the State Department's East Asia office'.¹⁰⁷ Bosworth's was only a part-time appointment, and he kept his day job as Dean of The Fletcher School at Tufts University. The part time appointment was an indication of the low priority that the Obama administration gave to North Korean issues, but the nature his replacement is widely seen as lowering that priority even further.¹⁰⁸ It is also seen as fitting in a pattern where Obama tries to disengage from foreign policy issues in preparation for the 2012 election. Mike Green, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in a posting on the *Foreign Policy* website, commented:

This shift demonstrates several things about the Obama administration's diplomacy. First, it signals the end of candidate Obama's promise of dramatic new engagement strategies with the world's most difficult regimes. High profile special envoys (Mitchell to the Middle East, Grayson to Sudan, Holbrooke to Af/Pak, Bosworth to North Korea) are being replaced by steady but low-profile professionals from within the foreign service. Davies is only the most recent example....

The other factor at play, I suspect, is the 2012 election. I recall that in 2004 the White House began imposing message discipline and tighter controls over sensitive foreign policy issues like North Korea, Taiwan, and Iraq.¹⁰⁹

It was noticed, at least in the South Korean press, that Obama's State of the Union speech 2012, the first salvo in his re-election campaign, contained no mention of North Korea.¹¹⁰ Various interpretations were put on that but it was the *Hankyoreh* which correctly identified the implications: 'Pyongyang apparently on the back burner as US President looks ahead to his own election'.¹¹¹ Any deal with North Korea, even a return to the Six Party Talks, would inevitably involve some compromise and that would lay Obama open to the charge of appeasement.

It is certain that Obama will play the China card throughout the election campaign – China bashing being a staple, and increasingly a major one, of the foreign policy component of US elections along with beefing up the military – but it is likely that he will seek to keep foreign issues under wraps as much as possible. This seems to be because while what are touted as 'successes' – the killing of Osama bin Laden, or the taking of Libya – give a temporary blip to the incumbent's popularity, the challengers can, and do, call for a tougher line without, at this stage, having to face the consequences, financial and political, of that.¹¹² They can always out-bid the incumbent. In the strange electoral arithmetic of US election politics the denuclearisation of North Korea would probably work against Obama. The 2012 election also underscores Obama's 'refocus on Asia'.¹¹³ On the one hand it attempts to divert attention from failure in the greater Middle East, and on the other it offers an arena to talk tough, to wave the flag of danger without there being any real danger because China is in no position, yet, to take counter action. The one place this strategy of confrontation might come seriously unstuck is in Korea.¹¹⁴

And then there is Libya. Even if the administration were anxious to pursue negotiations with North Korea the Libyan example would loom over things. It will be recalled that during the Bush administration Muammar Gadhafi came to an accommodation to give up weapons of mass destruction and to 'renounce terrorism' in return for the lifting of sanctions and assurances of the ending of attempts to overthrow his regime.¹¹⁵ Leading Bush officials extolled the 'Libyan example'. Rumsfeld advised North Korea 'follow Libya'.¹¹⁶ Condoleezza Rice, on the occasion of the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in 2006 enthused:

"Just as 2003 marked a turning point for the Libyan people so too could 2006 mark turning points for the peoples of Iran and North Korea," Ms. Rice said in a statement. "Libya is an important model as nations around the world press for changes in behavior by the Iranian and North Korean regimes."¹¹⁷

The 'Libyan model' now carries different connotations and many writers, across the spectrum, have drawn the obvious conclusion that for North Korea to relinquish its nuclear deterrent would be suicidal.¹¹⁸

North Korea

The DPRK reacted to the crisis much as one might expect. Being small and vulnerable it sought support from friends, made overtures to enemies, strengthened its defences, and avoided actions which could seriously be seen as provocative. There was no escaping the portrayal in the media and elsewhere of innocuous things such as the proposed search and rescue exercises with the Russians as threatening, but that was inevitable.

There were the visits by Kim Jong Il himself, and that of senior officials to China and Russia, and the receiving of high level delegations. It is impossible to assess just how successful those visits were; did the Korean get as much as they wanted? Were there disagreements on how to handle the situation? The answer to both those questions is probably yes. For instance, China and North Korea come to issues from a different perspective. For China the most important thing at the moment is not to give the Americans cause or pretext for any military action or hostility that goes beyond the rhetorical flourishes. China is currently vulnerable but has, with good reason, great expectations and can expect the balance of power to move in its direction. So a degree of appeasement, perhaps to defer conflict if it cannot be avoided, makes sense. North Korea, on the other hand, will always be much weaker than the United States, and South Korea, so the challenge is not merely existential but also is unlikely to become less threatening. Appeasement is not an option.

Having said that, there is no reason to accept the line of right-wing sources such as the *Chosun Ilbo* that North Korea has been rebuffed at every turn.¹¹⁹ On the contrary, there is a general agreement that North Korea's relations with both Russia and China have greatly improved since the *Cheonan* incident.

Significantly the reason for this improvement is usually couched in general terms rather than being related directly to the incident, or more precisely the investigation rather than the sinking. Thus Kim Young-jin in an article in the *Korea Times* entitled 'Russia, N. Korea forging closer ties', ascribed these to 'a push by Moscow to boost its influence in the region.'¹²⁰

Similarly, Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, of the firmly pro-US 'independent think tank' International Crisis Group noted the improvement in China –North Korea relations:

But internal debates on North Korea policy have given way to traditionalist and conservative forces increasingly dictating the line, backed by nationalist public opinion. Over the past year and a half, China has strengthened its political, economic and military relationship with the North, refusing to hold Pyongyang to account for deadly attacks on the South which recently brought the peninsula the closest to war since 1953.¹²¹

Again this was explained in general terms:

But Beijing's calculations are also increasingly shaped by rising concerns about a perceived U.S. strategic "return to Asia" and by opposition to American military and political presence in the region. China is using its close ties

with Pyongyang as a bulwark against U.S. military dominance in the region, giving the rogue nation virtually unconditional diplomatic protection.¹²²

Her point about Chinese reaction to what is (correctly) perceived to be a US strategy of containment of China is correct. As also was her comment that:

Beijing's solidarity with Pyongyang has significantly strained relations with South Korea and Japan, which are strengthening their security alliances with the U.S.¹²³

Yet the logic is flawed and the direction of causality inverted. Why would China unnecessarily take up a position that would drive South Korea and Japan into America's arms? The only plausible explanation for China's improving its relationship with North Korea is that it sees the South as producing the crisis on the peninsula, and that despite unfortunate side effects (the strengthening of the US alliances with ROK and Japan) it has to make it clear that it supports the North and will not tolerate a takeover.

North Korea has turned to Russia and China for support in the post-Cheonan situation and received it because the leadership of both countries realise not merely that it was not responsible for the sinking of the ship but that South Korea, in concert with the US, falsely accused the North, and fabricated evidence, in order to foment a crisis.

Turning to traditional friends was only one part of North Korea's strategy; the corollary was to make overtures to those countries which were threatening it. It is often unclear from the press reports whether these are unsolicited initiatives from North Korea or a positive response to moves by the other country. Unfortunately, there is little indication that these peace overtures achieved anything

There was an isolated report in the *Hankyoreh* in January 2011 that 'N. Korea pushes for talks with Japan', but that appeared to lead to nothing.¹²⁴ In October a team of Japanese doctors from Hiroshima visited North Korea to examine victims of the 1945 atomic bombs, 'a trip that may help improve dismal ties between the countries' reported Associated Press.¹²⁵ There were no reports of any state-to-state developments. North Korea, for its part, lost an opportunity to build bridges in the wake of the Fukushima incident in March. Though there were reports of members of Chongryon, and other (North) Korea association in Japan giving assistance to assistance to 'Korean compatriots' affected by the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown there seemed to be no formal expression of condolences from Pyongyang.¹²⁶ The Japanese cabinet's decision in early April to renew sanctions against North Korea, the 7th time since they were imposed in 2006 further exacerbated the 'dismal ties' between Tokyo and Pyongyang.¹²⁷

Overtures to the United States

There was much more activity in respect of the United States. North Korea overtures to the US are not new but never appear to achieve much. This is probably mainly because the driver of US policy towards Korea is hostility to China, rather than anything North Korea actually does. There are, of course, other specific factors, one of which is cross-cultural misunderstanding. This is illustrated by a good description by Mike Chinoy, the former CNN correspondent who has so well documented the Bush administration's dissension-cluttered North Korea policy, of the visit of Marshal Jo Myong Rok to Washington in October 2000.¹²⁸ The article, entitled 'No Hostile Intent: A Look Back at Kim Jong

Il's Dramatic Overture to the Clinton Administration', described how the Koreans wanted Clinton to come to Pyongyang for a summit with Kim Jong Il, but the Americans balked at that –“We said presidents don't come. Summits get prepared for presidents” said Wendy Sherman.¹²⁹ A compromise was reached. Secretary Madeleine Albright went to prepare for a possible presidential visit (which did not eventuate) and a communiqué was issued which claimed that both sides were “prepared to undertake a new direction in their relations.” Moreover “neither government would have hostile intent toward the other and confirmed the commitment of both governments to make every effort in the future to build a new relationship free from past enmity.” How things would have turned out if this had happened earlier in Clinton's presidency rather than right at the end we do not know, but in the event Clinton was succeeded by Bush, and then by Obama and the US policy of hostility has continued unabated.

Chinoy's article contains the following intriguing passage:

It was the uniform he [Jo Myong Rok] wore that everyone would remember. It brought to mind a Soviet general of bygone era—dull green, gold braid and epaulettes, a chest covered with medals. The whole effect was jarringly out of place at the 21st century White House.....

Catching his first glimpse of Jo's uniform, Chuck Kartman, the lead negotiator in Washington's frequently torturous dealings with Pyongyang, silently sucked in his breath. Kartman had been designated to meet Jo the previous evening. At Washington's Dulles Airport, Jo had been wearing a business suit and had seemed almost grandfatherly to Kartman. Always crafty, the North Koreans had told none of their American interlocutors of Jo's intention to wear his Marshal's uniform to the White House.¹³⁰

Those of us not in the military may snigger at the propensity of soldiers to wear costumes adorned with jewellery, but that is what they do. No doubt the 21st century White House continues to be frequented by generals in uniform, adorned with medals, presumably without raising eyebrows or causing people to suck in their breath. Why Jo's behaviour should be seen as an example of North Koreans being 'always crafty' is bemusing. He had presumably travelled on a commercial flight, and so had worn mufti. The following day he made a formal call on the US president as the personal emissary of his leader, and wore uniform. If the head of the US joint Chiefs of Staff had visited Pyongyang on a similar mission he too would surely have worn his uniform. Chinoy's article provides a useful insight into the role of personal, institutional, and cultural perceptions and behaviours in high politics and also provides a clue to why what might be called ambassadorial overtures between Pyongyang and Washington have achieved so little.

Marshal Jo's visit was an anomaly. Although senior North Koreans do go to the United States, and there is an ambassador based in New York, accredited to the United Nations the traffic has been mainly the other way.¹³¹ Secretary Albright and Defense Secretary William Perry went as official special envoys during the Clinton administration in the late 1990s.¹³² Senior Democratic Party politician Bill Richardson has visited on a semi-official basis a few times, most recently in December 2010 when he may well have contributed to the defusing of the Yeonpyeong crisis.¹³³ Bill Clinton himself went to Pyongyang in August 2009 to arrange the release of two American journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, who had been detained after crossing illegally over the China-North Korea border. High hopes were expressed that this visit would lead to a breakthrough in US-DPRK relations.

John Delury, associate director of Asia Society's Center on U.S.-China Relations and director of the North Korea Inside Out Task Force, and a well-informed and astute commentator enthused:

Equally promising, the ruling structure in Pyongyang appears relatively united in welcoming Mr. Clinton, and the symbolism of his trip...

Now, Mr. Clinton has the rare opportunity not only to reverse some of the negative drift in U.S.-DPRK relations since late last year, but also to re-establish the moment when he left office as the baseline in bilateral relations.... With the Clinton visit, we have the first gust of a warm wind in U.S.-DPRK relations. The Obama administration should act decisively to build on any positive momentum.¹³⁴

Although the journalists were released, and he had a meeting with Kim Jong Il there was no sign of any change in US policy after his visit. Although some, such as Delury, thought there was a real chance of a breakthrough and a return to the possibilities of December 1999, January 2000, ante-Bush that was wishful thinking.¹³⁵ Those who opposed peace negotiations with North Korea, such as John Bolton, decried the visit for much the same reason; they considered there was a possibility of a dialogue.¹³⁶ The liberal journalist John Feffer called on Obama to drop the Bush policy, especially the insistence of preconditions before negotiations could recommence. That did not and Feffer probably identified the reason when he compared Clinton to Carter:

Jimmy Carter, the saying goes, was destined to be a *great former president*. The jury is still out on Bill Clinton, but he certainly accomplished his mission to Pyongyang quickly and successfully [emphasis added].¹³⁷

Clinton had the added complication that he was also the husband of the Secretary of State, who had recently been swapping insults with the North Koreans, so if he engineered a breakthrough this would have been in the context of complicated personal dynamics.¹³⁸

In fact, the real problem was that he was a *former* president and incumbent presidents do not like their predecessors coming back from the grave, unless perhaps they have expressly summoned them. Carter was the prime example of this. He has been very active as a 'former president' taking on the self-appointed mantle of a representative of his country in difficult places, such as North Korea. It was Carter who so much annoyed Clinton and his officials by forcing the administration into negotiations with North Korea back in 1994 – he gave a CNN interview from Pyongyang sketching out a deal he had reached with Kim Il Sung.¹³⁹ Clinton in 2009 did not go out on a limb as Carter had in 1994. According to the Americans it was a private visit and Clinton was not in a position to discuss anything of substance. The North Koreans had a different take:

The meetings had candid and in-depth discussions on the pending issues between the DPRK and the U.S. in a sincere atmosphere and reached a consensus of views on seeking a negotiated settlement of them....

Clinton courteously conveyed a verbal message of U.S. President Barack Obama expressing profound thanks for this [pardoning the journalists] and reflecting views on ways of improving the relations between the two countries...

The DPRK visit of Clinton and his party will contribute to deepening the understanding between the DPRK and the U.S. and building the bilateral confidence.¹⁴⁰

Regrettably, CNN was not there so whatever was said has had no impact on US policy.

The Clinton visit took place before the *Cheonan* incident. Had his trip led to a breakthrough in US-DPRK relations then the sinking of the *Cheonan* probably would not have led to a crisis. However Carter did go to Pyongyang after the incident, as did Bill Richardson.

Carter's visit, like Clinton's, was to arrange the release of an American detained in North Korea. This part of a familiar pattern. An American, or sometimes more than one as in the case of the three in Iran, rather inexplicably wander over the border of a country with whom the US is at loggerheads, and usually refusing to talk to. Sometimes the illegal entry is presumably accidental, as with the two journalists, and in other instances it is deliberate and seemingly due to religious dementia; this appears to have been the case with two recent cases involving Americans in North Korea, Aijalon Gomes and Robert Park.¹⁴¹

Death and transition

The death of Kim Jong Il on 17 December 2011 unleashed a torrent of articles, analysis, and commentary.¹⁴² Most of it was based on the assumption that his death would produce perhaps a crisis, at least a change. The crisis scenario had been the frontrunner in previous years and up to the immediate aftermath of his death.¹⁴³ As Victor Cha, the right-wing academic-cum official (he served under George W. Bush) put it:

This is a watershed moment. Any expert would have told you that the most likely scenario for a collapse of the North Korean regime would be the sudden death of the North Korean leader. We are now in that scenario.¹⁴⁴

He was not the only one to consider the time long awaited may have come at last. Lee Myung-bak put the army on alert, presumably to be in a position to take advantage of any sign of instability in the North.¹⁴⁵ Their hopes were soon dashed as it became apparent that there was no instability and that the transition was proceeding smoothly; Scott Snyder noted:

North Korea's leadership succession from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un has gone according to script.¹⁴⁶

A smooth transition still left open a couple of questions – was Kim Jong Un really in charge, and if so, what changes in policy were likely?

Pundits pontificated, and the role of the Kim family, and those married into it, principally Jang Song Thaek was much discussed.¹⁴⁷ However, since the foreign intelligence services had not known of the death of Kim Jong Il until it was officially announced, two days after the event, caution should be exercised in giving too much credence to these assessments.¹⁴⁸ Certainly we can look at the composition of the funeral committee and who accompanied the bier at Kim Jong Il's funeral, but this really only gives us an indication of nominal power, it does not reveal the secrets underneath.¹⁴⁹

We are on surer ground with the second question, on possible changes, because we have a lot more contextual information and it is a matter of interpreting that.

Once it became clear, even to those most anticipatory, that the transition was stable then there was an almost general consensus that no immediate change was in the offing. This was a safe bet however one might read the situation.

Almost general consensus, but not quite. Victor Cha still kept to the hope that collapse was just around the corner:

North Korea as we know it is over. Whether it comes apart in the next few weeks or over several months, the regime will not be able to hold together after the untimely death of its leader, Kim Jong-il.

Mr. Kim's death could not have come at a worse time for North Korea. Economically broken, starving and politically isolated, this dark kingdom was in the midst of preparations to hand power over to his not-yet-30-year-old son, the untested Kim Jong-un. The "great successor," as he has been dubbed by the state media, is surrounded by elders who are no less sick than his father and a military that chafed at his promotion to four-star general last year without having served a day in the army. Such a system simply cannot hold¹⁵⁰.

Others, such as Evans Revere, of the Brookings Institution in Washington allowed a bit more leeway before the apocalypse

Kim Jong-un inherits a country that is more isolated and impoverished than ever, that is burdened with severe international economic sanctions, and whose industrial infrastructure is literally crumbling. It cannot long continue on this path. While he will likely (and necessarily, in order not to tarnish his father's legacy) emphasize continuity at the outset of his rule, the young Kim will have to face the cold reality of the North's predicament and either take the DPRK on a new path or risk collapse. The decisive moment for North Korea will happen on his watch.¹⁵¹

Given that Kim Jong Un is reportedly in his late twenties, if he lives as long as his father, then that watch could last for 40 years.

What might this new path be? Daniel M. Kliman, writing in *Foreign Policy* opined:

...Pyongyang could depart from the path of confrontation and seek to normalize relations with the United States. To signal its desire for improved ties, North Korea could make limited changes internally -- the opening of an Associated Press news bureau in Pyongyang, announced just this week, is suggestive.¹⁵²

In fact, Pyongyang under Kim Il Sung, and then under Kim Jong Il, had been trying for decades to normalise relations with Washington. Peaceful coexistence with the United States was at the centre of its foreign policy and it had written normalisation into the *Agreed Framework* signed with the Clinton administration in 1994. It was Washington that refused normalisation, and rejected 'improved ties'. The opening of the Associated Press bureau in Pyongyang was by means the first overture as we have seen, and there is no reason at the moment to be hopeful that it will be reciprocated any more than the others.

Kliman, Revere, Cha and most of the other 'experts' make the fundamental mistake of ascribing too much freedom of action to the leadership in North Korea. There are no new paths to be taken, for the moment at least. North Korea is a small, threatened, encircled state whose choices are severely circumscribed. There are many who suggest that it should follow the road of China, opening up to trade and investment, not realising(a la Kliman) that that is precisely what it has been trying to do, and that China was only able to do that in the 1970s when Nixon lifted the embargo, coming to terms with China in order to outflank the Soviet Union.

One reason the transition went so smoothly, and there has been no sign of 'instability' was that presumably everyone in the leadership was very much aware that the vultures were hovering, ready to descend if there was any indication of disunity. Those generals of Victor Cha might have 'chafed at [Kim Jong Un's] promotion to four-star general last year' but they would surely have known that to break ranks would have been fatal. They would have the example of America's enemies such as Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, and Muammar Gadhafi to contemplate, as well as the realisation of past enmities- the Korean War itself but before that the time when their fathers fought against the Japanese, under Kim Il Sung, while others of that generation, such as Park Chung-hee, had

fought under the Japanese flag. It is likely that a South Korean takeover of the North would be a vengeful and bloody business.¹⁵³ One Russian report estimated that in that event '1 million North Korean supporters of the old regime will flee to either China or Russia'.¹⁵⁴

So for the moment it would seem that the only thing North Korea can do is to soldier on with basically the same policies. Surrender would be catastrophic and neither the United States nor South Korea will move to peaceful engagement.

This is not to say there will be no changes in North Korea. Kim Jong Un seems to be already showing himself more extrovert than his father, and similar to his grandfather.¹⁵⁵ But these differences, though important, are of personality and style rather than state policy. That cannot shift in any great degree because it is constrained by external forces.

Dr Haksoon Paik, a Senior Fellow at the Sejong Institute in South Korea edges towards a recognition of this when he writes:

...during this period of mourning and stabilization, Kim Jong Un is currently in a passive mode, looking for goodwill signs from the US and South Korea, not taking any initiative in dealing with them. This means that the ball is in our court for the moment.¹⁵⁶

The chances of meaningful 'goodwill signs' from the US seem remote but South Korea, as it moves towards the post-Lee Myung-bak era, is another matter.

That is why developments in South Korea are so important

South Korea

South Korea is the most important country, and Lee Myung-bak the leading actor, in this journey to the brink and back. How far back is uncertain because the signals are mixed. But there is no doubt of Lee's centrality in the process, though that is now on the wane. It was he who took the peninsula from talk of 'Advancing Inter-Korean Relations and Peace and Prosperity' at the summit between Kim Jong Il and Roh Moo-hyun in October 2007 to the precipice at the end of 2010. There has been a certain consistency in policy of the other main countries. Russia and China have, in different ways, pressed for peace and stability. North Korea has had to balance the demands of not provoking an invasion with not giving indication that it is on the verge of collapse and ripe for invasion. The United States, occupied with other concerns at home and abroad has tended to follow Lee's policy. And this is where there have been changes, although how real and substantial these changes are is a matter of dispute. Real or dissembled, why has Lee Myung-bak apparently changed tack?¹⁵⁷ There appear to be two main reasons, one to do with North Korea and the other with domestic politics in the South.

When 2010 came to an end tension on the Korean peninsula was very high but there was no sign of collapse in the North, and as 2011 progressed the prospect further diminished. The outgoing British Ambassador, Peter Hughes, in a speech to journalists in Seoul in September said there 'the possibility of an uprising similar to recent examples in the Middle East and North Africa remained low' and the article concluded:

On living in Pyongyang, the envoy said he noticed "cosmetic" changes such as a greater number of cars and the presence of more colorful and stylish clothing. "But fundamentally there have been no changes in terms of ideology or policy," he added.¹⁵⁸

The *Chosun Ilbo* described with some glee a report from the Russian think tank the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IEMO) which it alone appears to have obtained; the full

report (480 pages) appears not have been seen by any other media outlet and has not been released on the IMEMO website.¹⁵⁹

According to the *Chosun Ilbo*, in an article headed 'Russia Expects N.Korea to Collapse by 2020':

[IMEMO] says the regime's collapse is "accelerating" and that although reunification may not be fully achieved, the two Koreas will take "actual steps" toward reunification in the next two decades.

IMEMO believes the 2012-2020 transfer of power from North Korean leader Kim Jong-il to his son Jong-un will trigger the collapse of the North. The leadership crisis will lead to a power struggle between "bureaucrats" with foreign business connections and "military and security officials" with no outside links, the report said.¹⁶⁰

Curiously, the short English version of the report (56 pages) which has been released is much more cagey:

The possibility to solve North Korean nuclear problem will come much closer in case of a collapse of existing political regime in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.....

Political situation in Iran and North Korea could follow scenarios of conservation of power in the hand of current leaders.¹⁶¹

However, even if we take the *Chosun Ilbo* description and even if we put to one side the question of why this Russian forecast should be more credible than the numerous predictions of collapse that have been made over the last twenty years – 'Academics have been writing about the coming collapse of North Korea ever since the dominoes started to fall in Eastern Europe'¹⁶² – the timing gives cold comfort to Lee Myung-bak. 2020 is a long time away and his term of office constitutionally comes to an end in February 2013.

Then, the death of Kim Jong Il on 17 December 2011, and the subsequent 'smooth transition' dashed hopes that a collapse was in the offing.

Furthermore, relations with China and Russia, as we have seen, warmed and developed. Trade with China grew substantially, nearly doubling, and was set to reach a record level in 2011.¹⁶³ China, in particular, took a high profile to make it clear that it endorsed the transition and would not tolerate attempts to destabilise, let alone invade, North Korea.¹⁶⁴ There was also, late January 2012, an intriguing report in the Japanese paper *Asahi Shimbun*, reproduced in South Korea, quoted an unnamed Chinese 'military' as saying "Our forces have enhanced mobility. We will be able to enter Pyongyang in a little more than two hours if necessary."¹⁶⁵ Whether this was a deliberate warning to South Korea and the US, or just media vapours, is unclear.

All in all, North Korea looks less vulnerable than when Lee came to office, and this strengthening paradoxically owes much to his own *nordpolitik*.

His policy was a strange, misshapen creature. As discussed above, we can discount the ostensible 'grand bargain' and presume that he was seeking something more. If it had succeeded, and North Korea had collapsed, then perhaps the South could have absorbed it. But that scenario ignored resistance, Chinese intervention and all the consequences of war and pacification. Leaving aside these dangers, a forced absorption of the North would impose incredible costs on the South, which might well cripple it financial and socially.¹⁶⁶ If it failed then what has happened was predictable; it would drive North Korea into the embrace of China. Moreover it strained South Korea-China relations.¹⁶⁷ This may not have any immediate effects, and Lee could still pay what was ostensibly an

amicable visit to Beijing in January 2012.¹⁶⁸ However, the longer term and strategic implications are more serious.

A problem with polities with fixed terms is that towards the end of the term the leader becomes a 'lame duck president'. One result is that policies which are deemed to have failed, or not yet succeeded (and as the deadline approaches the chances of success recede) come under increasing attack. So it has been with Lee's *nordpolitik*.¹⁶⁹

Conservatives in disarray

Meanwhile the situation facing Lee within South Korea is becoming increasingly difficult. To some extent this is inevitable, but generic or global problems have been aggravated by specific policies. The global economic situation obviously impacts on South Korea and growth has slowed. This is compounded with familiar structural issues which have not been adequately addressed by the government; the superrich are doing well and the middle class is being impoverished.¹⁷⁰ The economic problems may be exacerbated as Seoul bows to Washington and increases economic warfare against Iran, hurting itself greatly in the process – Korea may well lose its 50% share of the Iranian automobile market (presumably mainly to China) while Iran is an important source of petroleum products.¹⁷¹ The Free Trade Agreement with the United States remains a constant irritant and source of unpopularity.¹⁷²

The president's party, the Grand National Party, is in danger of collapse, and there are rumours that Lee himself will leave it.¹⁷³ And if he does not leave the GNP, the party may well leave him.¹⁷⁴ His old-time adversary, Park Geun-hye, whom he beat to become presidential candidate in 2007 is now leading the GNP away from him – 'Park Geun-hye starts 'anything but Lee' drive' – and seems certain to be the conservative candidate in 2012.¹⁷⁵ The GNP itself, perhaps out of a sense of desperation, has changed its name to *Saenuri* (New World), but as the *Chosun Ilbo* cautioned, this was unlikely to repair its fortunes.¹⁷⁶

Every day the whiff of corruption gets stronger.¹⁷⁷ Corruption has long been an intrinsic part of South Korea society and to some extent in the past it was tolerated because it was accompanied by rapid economic growth.¹⁷⁸ Corruption is still rampant, but perhaps toleration has lessened. Certainly the *Hankyoreh* was in no doubt that it was endemic and should be extirpated:

The corruption of the current administration is like a great vein of ore: no matter how much you dig, there is no end to it. Suspicions of corruption that erupted yesterday are drowned out up by new suspicions that pop up today. The scale of corruption grows daily, and the details are even more shockingly complicated. This is the true face of the "ethically perfect administration" boasted of by President Lee Myung-bak.¹⁷⁹

Fierce criticism of corruption in the administration is not confined to the liberal press, and the natural opponents of Lee Myung-bak. In commenting on the proposal to change the name of the GNP the right-wing *Chosun Ilbo* noted that the problems lay deeper:

But the reason the GNP is fighting for its very existence is not its name. Rather, the name has been tarnished by a prevailing view that it only supports the interests of a few wealthy people and the constant corruption scandals surrounding its lawmakers.¹⁸⁰

The main issue that concerns voters is, as usual, the state of the economy. The economic prospects for 2012 look bleak.¹⁸¹ What effect this will have on the elections is difficult to predict; when times

are bad electorates often turn to conservatives thinking, probably erroneously, that they know best how to run the economy. However, to the degree that economic problems are identified with ruling party policies – such as pro-Americanism, sanctions on Iran and principally the unpopular Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUSFTA) – then this may turn them to the left.¹⁸² The ruling party going into the election, now called *Saenuri*, or ‘New World’ (the official English name has to be determined), presumably led by Park Geun-hye, will seek to distance itself from the old ruling party, the GNP, of Lee Myung-bak, but we do not know how successful that will be.¹⁸³

Whatever the outcome of the elections in 2012, whether the conservatives or the progressives win, and under which leaders and to what degree, one thing seems certain. The *nordpolitik* of Lee Myung-bak is dead and will be replaced by something else. Various questions flow from that.

Reactions to a new *nordpolitik*

A crucial constituency here will be the business community. Despite Lee Myung-bak the Kaesong Industrial Park has thrived.¹⁸⁴ The South Korean small and medium businesses (SMEs) involved, as well as the Hyundai Group which manages it, are champing at the restrictions and there is substantial room for expansion.¹⁸⁵ The inroads into the North Korean economy by the Chinese as a result of Lee’s policy must be very frustrating for South Korean business. It is significant that of the two South Koreans that Lee could not stop from going to Pyongyang to pay condolences on Kim Jong Il’s death, one was Hyundai Group chairwoman Hyun Jeong-eun (the other being Kim Dae-jung’s widow Lee Hee-ho). Hyundai also ran the Kumgangsan tourism venture, before that was killed off by Lee, and it is no secret that Hyun Jeong-eun is hoping to regain that.¹⁸⁶ Kumgangsan has been open up to other tourism operators, principally the Chinese, but its natural consumer base is in South Korea.¹⁸⁷

China and Russia

Both countries place a high premium on stability on the Korean peninsula and both, it would appear, have been annoyed by Lee’s adventurism. Chinese commercial interests, especially in Northeast China, have benefited from South Korea’s partial withdrawal from the North Korean market and presumably would not welcome a resurgence. However, this is unlikely to weigh too heavily with policy makers in Beijing. Moreover, an expanding economy in the North, even with South Korean competition, would offer opportunities.

United States

Although Washington would not welcome a rapprochement between Seoul and Pyongyang it would no doubt applaud it in public while opposing it in private. What pressure it could, and would, apply remain uncertain. So far, as has been noted, the Obama administration seems to have been fixated on Lee Myung-bak, and has let him drive its Korea policy. It has made the familiar mistake of valuing a client on the basis of pro-Americanism rather than a dispassionate appraisal – “We believe what he says. We believe that he’ll follow through on his commitments. We think he is paying attention to our concerns and our interests” Obama is quoted as saying.¹⁸⁸ However, at least one US commentator has realised that Lee is on his way out and that a new regime, quite possibly from the opposition, will take over in Seoul:

David Straub, associate director of the Korean Studies Program at Stanford University's Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, said Obama has been "negligent" in trying to broaden support from Korea's opposition for his policy on the Korean Peninsula...

Other senior U.S. officials should have made greater efforts to meet opposition leaders, establish personal relationships, and explain American thoughts about the situation on the peninsula, he added.

"The failure to do so may hurt U.S. interests, especially if the Korean opposition wins the legislative and presidential elections this year."¹⁸⁹

It is likely that either a second term Obama or a first term Republican will find it difficult to adjust to a new government in Seoul, and its policies towards China, the North, and to the United States itself (for instance over KORUS FTA) very different from that of its 'best foreign friend' Lee Myung-bak.¹⁹⁰

North Korea

Pyongyang, or more precisely the National Defence Commission, threw down a gauntlet with the publication on 2 February 2012 of an 'Open Questionnaire' to Seoul setting out the preconditions for the resumption of dialogue.¹⁹¹

North Korea's wish list falls on deaf ears in Seoul

NDC's requirements in advance of dialogue unlikely to be met by the South

North Korea's National Defense Commission, which is considered the country's highest organ of leadership, on Thursday publicly issued list of nine points ahead of the resumption of inter-Korean dialogue and improved relations. This is the first substantial response from the North Korean government to the suggestion of "high-level talks" that the South Korean government has been making since the beginning of the year. Around half of the questions will be hard for the South Korean government to accept and it is unclear whether the announcement will help improve North-South relations.

First on the NDC's list was a demand that the South Korean government apologize for not sending official condolences after the December 2011 death of NDC chairman Kim Jong-il. The North also demanded that the South openly declare that it would no longer badmouth the North regarding the sinking of the Cheonan warship and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. It asked, too, for a total cessation of the "Key Resolve" joint military exercise due to take place at the end of this month, and the abolition of anti-North Korea laws, such as the National Security Law. It is unlikely that the South Korean government will fall in line with these measures.¹⁹²

It was indeed unlikely that the South Korean government would 'fall in line' and the rejection from Seoul was swift and dismissive.¹⁹³ This stand was immediately supported by the United States. On 1 February Kurt Campbell, the US Assistant Secretary of State laid down, yet again, the preconditions that North Korea had to meet before negotiations with the US could resume.¹⁹⁴ On 3 February a US State Department spokesperson, in yet another example of the double standards which the American elite probably unconsciously applies to its dealings with the world, said, referring to the North Korean demands, "I think we've long said no preconditions".¹⁹⁵

An opening to the future

Pyongyang presumably anticipated this reaction from the South Korean government but was, in fact, initiating a negotiating dialogue with Lee Myung-bak's successor. What form that negotiation will take, and what the outcome will be, are at this stage unknown. However, the indications are that over the next year there may be a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations. That would be

encouraged by China and Russia and it is likely that the United States (and Japan) would be under pressure to give at least grudging support.

Whatever the outcome of political jousting and elections in the South it is virtually certain that there will be a change of policy towards the North, and in the direction of engagement. A progressive administration would in likelihood want to take this further than a conservative one. However, progressives would always be open to attack that they were 'selling out' while a conservative president, say Park Geun-hye, would have the 'Nixon advantage' of being invulnerable to such criticism.

Negotiation is not merely a two-way business, but an unfolding process where acrimony leads to acrimony, and flexibility and confidence building measures may generate a similar response from the other side. The nine points of the 'Open questionnaire' of 2nd February were a mixed bunch and they require a variety of treatment. The first point, that of not sending official condolences on the death of Kim Jong Il, could relatively easily be disposed of with appropriate expressions of regret, and any blame could be laid at the feet of Lee Myung-bak. The *Cheonan* is quite different. No North Korean government could apologize for the sinking after saying it was not responsible, whether or not it had actually sunk the ship. Similarly no South Korean government can apologise for the investigation (and the apparent false accusation and fabrication of evidence). Lee Myung-bak might have authorised the 'frame-up', but it was the Ministry of National Defense that carried it out. Whatever the civilian government in Seoul the military will remain a very powerful force. The best solution for the *Cheonan* incident (and for Yeonpyeong) is to let them wither away, not pressing the other side; a variant of the 'don't ask, don't tell' strategy.

The military exercises are yet another matter. They fulfil various functions, from playing with the toys through to practising for an invasion.¹⁹⁶ The invasion scenario understandably gets the North very nervous; what innocent explanation can there be for the marine landing exercises in 2012 to be 'the largest of its kind in 23 years'?¹⁹⁷ It would be very difficult for the (civilian) government in Seoul to do much about them. Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun did manage to tone them down a bit on occasions – they were scaled down somewhat in 2000 because of the summit.¹⁹⁸ Curtailing exercises calls into question the very existence of the military that carry them out, and the industry from provides the equipment. The vested interests involved are formidable. There is the ROK military itself with some 655,000 troops and a budget of \$22.5 billion.¹⁹⁹ Behind that there is a substantial, and fast growing, military industry.²⁰⁰ The Japanese military, with the 4th largest budget in the world are becoming increasingly involved, driven by the desire for remilitarisation and the US containment of China.²⁰¹ On top of this there is the overarching power of the United States. All this presents a huge, perhaps insuperable, challenge to a South Korea president wanting to move towards peace.²⁰² The problem is compounded because there is relatively little that the other side can do. If, for instance, North Korea and China held joint military exercises similar to the ones conducted by South Korea and the United States, then one set could be bargained against the other. But although both North Korea and China hold their own individual military exercises, they do not have joint ones and their exercises, and military strength, are very modest compared to that fielded by the United States and its allies.

Economic, tourism, and people-to-people exchanges offer more traction towards peace. Although Lee Myung-bak was not able to close down the Kaesong Industrial Park (and in fact it has grown

despite him) he did stifle other inter-Korean trade, and investment.²⁰³ This policy could relatively easily be reversed, as could the barriers to tourism. It is significant that one of the policies put forward by the ruling party (GNP/Saenuri) for the April elections is a proposal to promote youth exchanges and family reunions.²⁰⁴ Whilst this is not likely to register much progress while Lee is still in office (until February 2013) a positive reaction now from Pyongyang would be useful in setting the post-Lee agenda.

However, the biggest impetus that North Korea can make now to the improvement of inter-Korean relations might well be the promise that Kim Jong Un would go to Seoul in 2013 for a return summit. For whatever reason his father never did make that journey, but if he does it might be a real game changer. It is significant that when Lee Hee-ho and Hyun Jeong-eun went to Pyongyang to offer condolences after Kim Jong Il's death, head of state 'Kim Yong-nam urged South Korea to implement the June 15 joint declaration signed at the first inter-Korean summit in 2000 and the Oct. 4 joint declaration of 2007.'²⁰⁵

The Korean-American writer and activist Christine Ahn has written that with the coming end of the Lee Myung-bak government a 'Korean Spring' is in the offing.²⁰⁶ She may be too optimistic about the reaction of the US administration to that, and the barriers in Korea itself – the 'Arab Spring' after all has not turned out too well for similar reasons – but there is reasonable ground for hope that the events of 2012 will usher in definite movement in the following year towards the 'peace and prosperity' promised by the 2007 summit.²⁰⁷

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