

Baptism of Fire for South Korea's First Woman President Park Geun-hye

By [Nile Bowie](#)

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Region: [Asia](#)

In the shadow of North Korea's third nuclear test, the inauguration this week of Park Geun-hye, Northeast Asia's first female president, is a momentous event.

Her father, former president Park Chung-Hee, was one of South Korea's most iconic and controversial figures. *[GR Editor's note: General Park Chung-hee, backed by the US, seized power in 1961 through a coup d'état establishing a military dictatorship, declaring martial law and suspending the constitution in 1972].*

Having lost both her parents to political assassinations, and being targeted herself by violent attacks throughout her career, Park's ascension to South Korea's top spot undoubtedly makes for a highly inspirational narrative.

The sight of the president gracefully donning a traditional hanbok dress after returning to Seoul's Blue House after 33 years speaks volumes of the ever-shifting gender roles in South Korea's traditionally Confucian male-dominated society.

In addition to confronting issues of unaffordable healthcare, crippling school tuition fees and the challenges that come with a rapidly aging society, Park also carries the burden of maintaining inter-Korean stability.

While Pyongyang offered signals of diplomacy when it reportedly requested permission to send a North Korean delegation to attend Park's inauguration ceremony, the North's state media appears to have already made up its mind on Park, likening her to a "political prostitute", in addition to a myriad of other colorfully offensive titles.

Relations between the two Koreas hit a low point during the tenure of Park's predecessor, Lee Myung-bak, and Pyongyang has voiced its discontent at what it views as Park's collusion with the Lee administration.

Following its nuclear test this month, Pyongyang threatened Seoul with "final destruction", and the rogue nation will likely offer more provocative rhetoric in the days to come to undermine the transition process.

Even so, the probability of a military strike from the North is low, and its actions follow a predictable pattern of procuring aid concessions in exchange for dialogue. Park campaigned on advocating a softer-line on Pyongyang, which will be difficult to accomplish in the current scenario she finds in office.

The new president has a new opportunity to roll back the policies of her predecessor by engaging in meaningful dialogue with Pyongyang, ensuring that her country avoids falling

into serious military confrontation with the North that could potentially yield vast civilian casualties on both sides.

During his New Year's Address, North Korean leader Kim Jong-eun struck a conciliatory tone toward the South, voicing intentions to bolster his isolated state's moribund economy. It's no secret that Kim is a figurehead backed by close advisers, the most prominent being Jang Sung-taek, known to be the husband of his late father Kim Jong-il's sister.

Park can best ensure the stability of inter-Korean relations by proposing a new inter-Korean dialogue that should take place with the respective nations' power brokers. Economic exchange would be the core of any genuine reconciliation between the two Koreas, and for that reason, the Kaesong Industrial Zone (KIZ) is of prime importance.

Undercover reports claim that smuggled South Korean media has started to subtly erode the regime's ideological grip on people in the North, and Pyongyang will certainly be hesitant to facilitate greater opportunities where North and South Korean civilians can interact.

One of the objectives Park campaigned on was reestablishing trust with Pyongyang, and this can best be accomplished by reestablishing the KIZ as an economic space, not a political one. North Korea provides the cheapest labor rates in Asia, and a new emphasis on the KIZ would benefit South Korea's mass-production economy, in addition to providing the North with much-needed financial incentives.

To ensure security on the Korean Peninsula, Park should not lure Pyongyang with concessions, but offer it a tangible stake in both economic and technological development.

Park has previously stated that the North's denuclearization is a prerequisite. Washington continues to station 28,500 troops in the South, controlling all military forces south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). At this point, Pyongyang has very little incentive to disarm. After the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994, his son, Kim Jong-il oversaw general economic mismanagement and a series of natural disasters that led to widespread starvation.

To legitimize his tenure, Kim Jong-il introduced Songun politics, a "military-first" policy aimed at appeasing the army and building up national defenses. The attainment of a "nuclear deterrent" has been trumpeted as a major accomplishment in domestic North Korean propaganda – simply put, Pyongyang is not going to cease its pursuit of a nuclear deterrent.

Park may be in a better position to negotiate with Pyongyang when the US draws down its forces and hands over operational control of the South Korean military to Seoul, currently scheduled to take place in 2015.

She has spoken of taking a middle-of-the-road approach with the North, but if her policy rests solely on being open to Pyongyang only on the condition that they disarm, the incoming administration will find itself mired in president Lee's legacy of tension.

One of the stated goals of Park's administration is to begin to construct the foundations for reunification. It would be a practical necessity for both Koreas to eventually come to an agreement on security issues, and as long as the US maintains a presence in South Korea, Park's administration must learn to accept Pyongyang's pursuit of a nuclear deterrent, perhaps on the condition that it vows not to threaten South Korea.

In a 2011 article published in the Council on Foreign Relations' Foreign Affairs website titled, "A New Kind of Korea," Park advocated the formation of a cooperative security regime between Asian states that would "help resolve persistent tensions in the region", in addition to threatening the North that it would "pay a heavy price for its military and nuclear threats".

This approach is not new, but in order to change the current situation, it must be enforced more vigorously than in the past". If Park intends on bolstering the status quo foreign policy direction established under president Lee, her administration's objectives of laying the foundations for reunification will not succeed.

2013 will be a critical year for South Korea; it will assume non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council for the first time in its history. The year will be critical in shaping the conditions necessary to bring about a "second miracle on the Han River" that Park promised in her campaign speeches. As a world leader in the production of consumer electronics and boasting the status of the most-wired nation, South Korea is now focusing on building a dynamic economy focused on digital and bio technologies.

As an answer to South Korea's economic problems, Park has advocated a two-pronged approach that utilizes a "creative economy" to counter slowed growth and "economic democracy" to counter growing income polarization.

Park sanctioned the newly created Ministry of Future Creation and Science to combine information technology with various other sectors to provide entirely new jobs to grow the national economy. Critics have scrutinized the fact that "economic democracy" – one of her main election-time slogans – was absent from a recently published list of governance goals, prompting some to raise serious questions about the substance of her goals and the vagueness of her concepts.

"Since the election, she has not made a single detailed reference to economic democratization. Now, the fact that she even removed the phrase from her administration goals sends a message to bureaucrats and to the finance sector that even Park Geun-hye will back down if you push hard enough. From now on, the lobbyists will push even harder," stated Kim Sang-jo, an economics professor at Hansung University.

Park's stated economic objective is to bring about a climate where large corporations and small and medium-sized enterprises can prosper side by side, shifting the focus from exports and big business to domestic demand, services, and small businesses, and marking a clear departure from her predecessor's neo-liberal policy.

Park has also come under criticism for watering down promises to strengthen the sentencing processes for unlawful activity committed by the directors of family-owned corporations such as Hyundai, Samsung, and LG, referred to as chaebol.

Opposition spokesperson Park Yong-jin for the Democratic United Party took aim at Park on the issue. "Lowering the priority of tasks related to economic democratization is more than just a violation of a key presidential campaign pledge. It is sure to spark allegations that all of the talk about economic democratization during the campaign was a lie. We are seeing the same old politics by politicians who don't keep their word," said Yong-jin.

Park Geun-hye has come to power with the lowest approval ratings of any previous

president, hovering at 44%. High dissatisfaction exists among the South Korean public toward Park's nominations for cabinet and other key positions; respondents of surveys published in South Korean media gave "mistaken nominations and the hiring of unscrutinized figures" as their reason for Park's low ratings.

She has also indicated significant increases in the nation's defense spending. Recent polls indicate that two-thirds of the South Korean public support the continuance of humanitarian aid to North Korea "regardless of the political situation", with over half the population supporting direct talks with Pyongyang.

The new leader can recapture public support by delivering on her campaign promises and reducing income inequality by leveling the playing field for small businesses, but if she pursues the kind of defense policy that she has advocated, she may find herself in an unpopular position with both Pyongyang and the South Korean people.

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Nile Bowie is an independent political analyst based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He can be reached at nilebowie@gmail.com

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