

Understanding the ‘Korean Peninsula Trust Process’

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The ‘Korean Peninsula trust process’ is arguably the backbone of the Park Geun-hye administration’s North Korea policy. Even amid North Korea’s third nuclear test, the closure of the Gaesung Industrial Complex, and its continued provocative behavior, the administration has repeatedly indicated that it will steadfastly pursue the Korean Peninsula trust process. In her Memorial Day speech, for instance, President Park once again stated that accepting the Korean Peninsula trust process was the way forward for North Korea. Despite its significance, misconceptions and controversy over the trust process continue to exist.

Background

The trust process starts from the recognition that previous administrations failed to make lasting progress in their relations with North Korea. While they pursued diverse, sometimes contradictory policies, none of them succeeded in changing North Korea’s behavior or improving inter-Korean relations in any meaningful sense. Though there was already a consensus that the vicious cycle of North Korean provocations followed by sanctions and eventual compromise must stop, simply criticizing North Korea for its provocations does not fundamentally resolve the problem. The trust process was thus devised in the beliefs that efforts to end the vicious cycle were necessary, and that confidence-building measures may be essential.

Also important, the trust process involves a more progressive thinking about peaceful conditions in the Korean Peninsula. The administration recognizes that peaceful relations cannot be achieved nor maintained through superior power alone superior power is a necessary but not sufficient condition for peace. Therefore, in addition to taking a realist approach based on the idea of 'security through power,' we must also bring about fundamental changes in inter-Korean relations through trust-building in order for a sustainable peace. Rather than simply 'keeping peace,' we should actively make peace. This is the fundamental idea behind the trust process.

Let's discuss the trust process in greater detail. First, it is not a policy of appeasement rather, strong national security is a prerequisite for the trust process. Specifically, the trust process is composed of two parts: keeping peace and making peace. The former is the foundation for the latter. It is not about unconditionally trusting North Korea it is about having a strong stance on security issues and seeking retribution for actions disrupting the peace, but at the same time improving relations and essentially altering North Korea's behavior when they keep their promises.

Second, it is not a situation-specific or a problem-solving policy. Rather, the trust process is best understood as a policy guideline that suggests the basic principles and general direction for inter-Korean relations. In other words, it is a policy guideline intended to fundamentally change relations between two Koreas it is different from unification policy, contingency plans, or policies to deal specific issues such as the nuclear problem in its nature.

Third, it is not only for when South-North relations are good. On the contrary, the trust process is most needed when relations deteriorate. Criticism that the trust process is difficult to implement due to current tensions or that it failed before it was even implemented stem from a misunderstanding of the trust process. In fact, the administration's current strategy enhancing deterrent capabilities, pushing for tougher responses against aggressions, all the while leaving the door open for talks shows that the trust process is actually at work. It is just that because of the current tensions, more weight is being put on "keeping peace" rather than "making peace."

Fourth, it is not conditional. This is the biggest difference from the Lee Myung-bak administration's North Korea policy. The trust process does not call for a complete halt in exchanges because certain conditions like denuclearization are not met. Instead, it is about actively searching for practical confidence-building efforts. Also, the process is flexible in that it alternates between deterrence and negotiations, and between security and exchanges, depending on the situation. Therefore, the process leans to neither absolute deterrence nor absolute exchange, but always a combination of the two.

Lastly, it is not limited to the Korean Peninsula, but instead it encompasses Northeast Asia. To implement the trust process in an international environment where it can operate, we need to

simultaneously promote confidence-building measures in Northeast Asia. The trust process can earn support and run smoothly when Northeast Asians work together. Reversely, the trust process can also contribute to peace and stability in Northeast Asia by promoting peace and stability on the Peninsula. In this sense, the trust process and President Park's Northeast Asia Peace Initiative are mutually-reinforcing initiatives.

How to Implement the 'Korean Peninsula Trust Process'

Perhaps the strongest criticism against the trust process is the viability of building trust with a country like North Korea. This section discusses approaches and steps to implement the trust process in reality.

First, the trust process takes a 'process' approach for implementation. The trust process should be understood as a process in which steady progress on confidence-building measures incrementally raises the degree of trust between the two sides, which, in turn, leads to higher levels of cooperation and improved relations. Specifically, this is the mutually reinforcing process in which according to the level of trust, exchange and cooperation between South and North are increased, and as a result, trust is further expanded. However, as history teaches us, high levels of exchange exceeding the confidence-building levels may be difficult to maintain they can be easily reversed. We must not forget the teachings of history.

Second, the trust process assumes a phased approach. Even if confidence is not completely established, in order to provide aid, exchange, or cooperate according to the level of trust, it is necessary to distinguish between different stages of confidence-building, exchange and cooperation. The initial phase requires respect for past agreements but should not require conditions like denuclearization. In this phase, we implement practical agreements and give unconditional humanitarian aid to the North, thereby building a base level of trust between the two sides (trust-building through agreements).

In the later phase, as more trust is built, the two sides can provide actual help to each other. With economic, social and cultural exchanges, a higher level of trust can be reached (trust-building through mutual benefits). When there is clear progress on denuclearization, exchange and cooperation will begin in earnest through the "Vision Korea Project" intended to a Korean Peninsula economic community (trust-building through a common vision of community).

In addition to the approaches discussed above, specific steps need to be discussed.

The first step in confidence-building is to keep promises, creating a basic foundation of trust. North Korea must comply with international norms and fulfill its agreements with South Korea and the international community. We must provide incentives for North Korea to comply by compensating it when they have fulfilled their promise. Humanitarian aid may also be a means of basic confidence-building.

The second step is to promote multilateral negotiations. Along with two-party talks between the two Koreas, we should make use of various other two-party and three-party talks (South Korea-United States-China, South/North-United States, South/North-China, etc.) and six-party talks for confidence-building. Multilateral initiatives such as the 'Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative' can act as a mechanism for confidence-building on the Korean Peninsula.

Without meaningful progress on denuclearization, however, it will remain difficult to advance beyond the 'keeping peace' and 'basic trust-building' stages (continuing humanitarian aid and leaving doors open for talks). At present, it is necessary to reinforce security, by, for instance, enhancing South Korea's deterrent power, while at the same time continuing to work with international community in order to get North Korea to take meaningful steps towards denuclearization. At the same time, more creative efforts to bring North Korea to meaningful talks are needed.

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