Abstract
Northeast Asia is a region where the strategic interests of powerful nations intersect. This has become evident due to changes in the security environment in recent years, and include: China’s strengthening military and its unilateral actions in the region; Russia increasingly asserting its nationalism; the expansion of Sino-Russia military cooperation; Japan’s worrying historical revisionism, and its conflict with China and recent changes in Japanese use of military force, which now can extend beyond self-defense; North Korea’s continued provocative application of missile and nuclear weapons threats; and lastly, the intensification of the United States’ “pivot toward Asia”. Park Geun Hye, upon taking office in 2013, observed that Asian countries suffered from what she termed “the Asian paradox”, meaning that Asia nations struggle with security cooperation and problem solving, despite economic integration. President Park proposed the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) in an effort to overcome the paradoxical security environment of Northeast Asia. The NAPCI is included in the Park Geun Hye administration’s core foreign policy concept, trustpolitik, which seeks to build an infrastructure of trust between neighboring countries and promote regional order based upon cooperation. The authors of this article examines the NAPCI and reviews its challenges.
Introduction

Taking office in 2013, President Park Geun Hye promised to take on a new initiative of “trust diplomacy” with North Korea and its neighbors. In contrast to Europe, Asian countries struggled with what Park describe as the “Asia Paradox”, which is that despite growing regional economic interdependence, security and political cooperation are without a parallel coordinated development. Since the end of the Cold War, territorial and historical disputes are still unresolved, which could potentially cause of conflict among countries in the region.

The paradox refers to the fact the Northeast region leads the world in economic growth, but has not effectively policy for security dilemmas and political conflicts. Park has indicated three main challenges that must be addressed to resolve the paradox: the first - the possibility of an arms race or rising political competition between Beijing and Washington; the second - the failure of Tokyo to finally confront the past and aggression in Asia; and thirdly – the failure to establish stable inter-Korean relations. Maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, which is the most important political priority of South Korean diplomacy. Trustpolitik is, in fact, an interlocking set of principles and policies aimed at establishing peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia by increasing cooperation among nations. Trust is a main element for President’s Park political philosophy which underlines that it should be not only among individuals, but also among nations. Park Geun Hye’s trust politics has the aspiration to solve two challenging security issues: inter-Korean competition and Northeast Asian competition. The first task is to build trust between two Koreas and stop a cycle of North Korea provocations; the second is building trust between nations of Northeast Asia. (MOFA 2015)

Conceptually, the foreign policy foundation of the Park Geun Hye administration was, at least at the time of its conception, bilateral and multilateral trust. Officially, the South
Korean government has referred to trust as a “prerequisite for inter-state cooperation and sustainable peace” (Lee 2016a: 1). This has obvious resonance in light of recent security developments in Northeast Asia. *Trustpolitik* is the encompassing concept that includes potential trust-building processes between South and North Korea, the Eurasia Initiative, South Korea’s attempts to operationalize middle power diplomacy and networking, and lastly, NAPCI.

**Defining NAPCI**

NAPCI is a multilateral process. It aims to build trust by accumulating conventions of dialogue and identifying areas of cooperation in non-traditional security related issues. These non-traditional security related matters have include: overcoming the Asia Paradox, pursuing East Asia’s joint peace and prosperity, establishing a liberal international order within East Asia, and creating a vision for the Asian community. Additionally, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has referred to seven “soft security issues”, which are part of the NAPCI process: nuclear safety, energy security, the environment, disaster management, cyberspace, health, and drugs. (MOFA 2015: 23-25) Initial success on these issues would be followed by expanding the agenda items to include hard security issues, such as political-military affairs. (Lee 2016a)

There are three broad guidelines that steer the course of NAPCI. First, cooperation and negotiations have the potential to develop into a broader initiative encompassing all of Northeast Asia through interaction with the Trust-Building Process on the Korean Peninsula. Second, NAPCI purports to establish a liberal international order in East Asia, rejecting the notion of a zero-sum
approach to defining national interests. Third, NAPCI seeks a regional collective security framework in keeping with the vision of a regional community also referred to as “the New Asia”. This means building a mechanism and culture of peace and cooperation through multilateral dialogue. Another objective is to cope with various uncertainties that include North Korea, contributing towards its participation in the international community and resolution of the nuclear problem. (Ibid.) Building sustainable peace and cooperation through NAPCI supports the Eurasia Initiative, which seeks to make Eurasia the “Peaceful Continent.” This is a plan to integrate Eurasia into a single continent (via energy and transportation networks), a creative continent (through technology and a fusion of cultures), and a peaceful continent (along with NAPCI and the Trust Building Process on the Korean Peninsula).

NAPCI begins with the participation of Northeast Asian countries including the Republic of Korea, China, Japan, Russia, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Mongolia, as well as the United States, which has a strong stake in the region. However, that is not all. It can be pursued along with other useful platforms such as the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) among South Korea, China, and Japan. The long-term goal of South Korean foreign policy planners at the beginning of the Park administration was that NAPCI would be able to develop cooperation with regional bodies such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the European Union (EU) by allowing their participation as observer states. The initiative was advertised to maintain an open stance so that it could develop into inclusive regional cooperation. (Kwon 2014; Lee 2016a)

The participation of important stakeholders, such as the United States (US) and China, is essential for sustainable peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Arguably, the Park administration had hoped that NAPCI would fit into the competing visions of regional order held by the United States and China. It is still the hope after three years of attempted implementation, that this can enhance an
environment advantageous for the US rebalance, but also can assuage concerns arising from great power competition as well as threats originating from North Korea. For the time being, the key challenge is the deficit of trust resulting from the US-China rivalry, and deteriorating Sino-Japanese relations.

**Korea’s Middle Power Diplomacy**

South Korea’s evolution toward middle power diplomacy spans over 40 years. The Olympic diplomacy of Chun Doo Hwan in the lead prior to the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics was an attempt to place South Korea as a well-positioned economic power with influence. President Roh Tae Woo’s (1988-1993) *Nordpolitik*, and his Consultative Conference for Peace in Northeast Asia, was an expression of the previous South Korean administration’s strategic desire for complementary security interests and systems in the region. In May 1994, the Kim Young Sam administration (1993-1998) proposed the establishment of the Northeast Asia Security Dialogue (NEASED) at the first ARF-Senior Officials Meeting encouraged by the foundation of the ARF, CSCAP (Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific), and the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD), though this failed to receive support from regional actors. President Kim Da Jung called for a multilateral security dialogue at a series of summits with Japan (October 1998), China (November 1988), and Russia (May 1999). However, his efforts did not result in concrete outcomes due to the absence of prior consultation with relevant countries and the lack of follow-up measures. (Lee 2016a)

Over the last three presidencies, South Korea has emerged as what it has described as a middle power. The Roh Moo Hyun government (2003-2008) expressed its middle-power aspirations in the
Northeast Asian Initiative, which projected South Korea’s pivotal role as a ‘balancer’ or ‘hub’ in the region to facilitate regional cooperation in economy and security. President Roh envisioned the country becoming a financial and transportation hub for the region, taking advantage of its geographical location. This economic vision was closely linked to a political desire to transform South Korea from a minor player on the periphery of regional geopolitics to an influential actor at the center of northeast Asian affairs. However, the ideologically progressive leader’s ‘balancer’ initiative had serious political repercussions internationally and domestically. This was the basis of criticism of what domestic opponents’ labeled “South Korean middle power activism”. (Choi 2009: 4-5) Many asked whether this new positioning would in reality mean a hollowing-out of the traditional alliance with the United States and thus hurt South Korea’s national interests. (Kim 2016 _2-4)

President Lee Myung Bak (2008-2013) entered office pledging to restore alliance relations with the United States and demanding a “reciprocal” relationship with P’yŏngyang. It was primarily under Lee Myung Bak that South Korea’s self-identification as a middle power took a more explicit form. A group of scholars promoted the concept to feed into national and international branding efforts at the start of the Lee presidency. Under the overarching slogan of ‘Global Korea’, the concept of middle power was used to support the aspiration to increase the country’s international influence by enhancing its networking capacity and convening power. (Konishi & Manyon 2009: 10-14) The government emphasized the functional aspect of middle-power diplomacy to legitimate South Korea’s role as a convener, conciliator and proactive agenda-setter in international negotiations and multilateral platforms such as the G20, the OECD and the Nuclear Security Summit. Middle-power identity relied on the country’s self-perception as a newly advanced economy and mid-ranked global power, capable of making a distinctive contribution to the global common good. In particular, Lee’s ‘niche diplomacy’ focused on issues such as international development and environmental and
economic cooperation. His government’s focus on global, non-security issues enabled its middle-power diplomacy to avoid any significant distancing of South Korea from the United States. (Kim 2016: 4-5)

Park Geun-hye’s government (2013 to present), after a generous use of middle-power diplomacy as a key to its foreign policy, retreated from the use of the concept in media early in Park’s term, with the government’s Eurasia Initiative emerging instead as a new third pillar. Unlike the Lee government, which was eager to brand South Korea as a middle power, the Park administration has been reluctant to apply this label to its diplomatic posture or identity. Its use of the term has been confined to its MIKTA-related activities and international development programs – two areas that emphasize South Korea’s non-security roles outside northeast Asia. MITKA is a minilateral initiative comprising Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey, South Korea and Australia, and was created in 2013 under South Korea’s leadership. Representatives of MIKTA countries regularly meet to identify and discuss common agendas. The Park government’s caution over the middle-power concept has reflected its fear of provoking apprehension and/or misunderstanding in the United States and China. Even though the Park government has been reluctant to employ the middle-power concept to define its regional engagement, public debates in the country and abroad have used terminology that describes South Korea’s increasingly ‘middle’ position between, and its ‘equidistance’ from, China and the United States. (Kim 2016: 6-8)
Summary of NAPCI Successes

Reflecting the official South Korean government assessment of NAPCI, Lee Sang-Hyun, Vice President for Research Planning, the Sejong Institute, a government think tank, summarizes what he calls the “modest successes” of the initiative:

First, NAPCI has gained a moderate support from the international community. So far, Korea has gained support from 29 countries and eight multilateral bodies by holding a host of NAPCI briefing sessions in major countries and at international organizations. Also, a number of leaders including President Barak Obama, have expressed their support for NAPCI during summit meetings. In particular, the Joint Declaration for Declaration for Peace and Cooperation, which was adopted in November 2015 at the trilateral summit among Korea, Japan, and China, provided a strong impetus for the advancement of NAPCI.

Second, there was a steady progress in intergovernmental consultations. After the First High-Level Intergovernmental Meeting on Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation was held in October 2014, all the official partners of NAPCI, Korea, the United States, Japan, China, Russia, and Mongolia, designated their respective focal points, laying the foundation for continued cooperation among these countries. When the Second High-Level Intergovernmental Meeting was held in October 2015, participation was raised to the deputy-minister level, and a Chairman’s Summary was adopted for the first time. Participants agreed to hold the Third Meeting in 2016, paving the way for the institutionalization of cooperation holding the meeting on a regular basis.

Third, as the South Korean government sees it, NAPCI has laid out foundations for continued cooperation in soft security issues. Nuclear safety, disaster management, energy security, public
health, cyberspace cooperation, environment, and drugs and narcotics are typical areas for functional cooperation among participating countries.

Fourth, NAPCI has strengthened public-private cooperation. Following its first forum in 2014, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Forum was held in Seoul in 2015. Some 300 experts from both the public and private sectors participated in the Forum and discussed concrete ways to promote cooperation in NAPCI’s key cooperation areas. In February 2015, a public-private cooperation network centering around the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Sejong Institute was established, enabling vibrant exchange of opinions on the future direction of NAPCI.

According Lee Sang Hyun “As an overall evaluation, it can be said that NAPCI has achieved a modest success in publicizing Park Geun-hye government’s important foreign policy priority. Yet, as we are now in the fourth year of the five-year term, there remains practically not much time to implement the declared policy goals of NAPCI—i.e., moving toward an early stage of institutionalization and evolving into dealing with a bit more traditional security issues in Northeast Asia”. (Lee 2016b).

**Criticisms of Park Geun Hye’s Foreign Policy**

The most common critique of Trustpolitik, of which NAPCI is an element, particularly from conservative organizations regarding inter-Korean relations, was that President Park’s new policy during her first two years in office, was that it stipulated no conditions, and was lacking clear focus or detailed plans of action. This was a reference to Lee Myung Bak’s policy toward North Korea, which was perceived as very conditional. “I suggest that the Park administration come up with more detailed policies on North Korea,” said Yoon Yeo-sang, a researcher at the Database Center for North
Korean Human Rights. “Trust-building between the two Koreas can only be achieved through interaction. The relationship cannot move forward while sticking to a past-oriented concept of ‘trust’”. (quoted in Chung 2013) The Park government’s willingness to engage is essential to improve inter-Korean ties”, said Prof. Kim Hyun-wook of the state-run Korea National Diplomatic Academy. “But the administration needs to push forward with the trust-building process more aggressively”.

(Ibid.) However, conservatives applauded Park Geun Hye’s October 2014 announcement that South Korea was a key partner in the United States’ rebalancing toward Asia., the 16 February 2016 South Korean Ministry of Unification’s announcement that the industrial park would be “temporarily" closed down”, in protest over Northern provocations, including a satellite launch and a claimed hydrogen bomb test in January 2016, and more recently, her administration’s unveiling contingency plans for a preemptive strike of P’yŏngyang. (Yonhap 2016)

Criticisms of President Park Geun Hye’s foreign policy relevant to NAPCI, especially from in progressive media, are numerous. After cautious support for her stated multilateral approach in East Asia, a central point of criticism revolved around President Park Geun Hye’s 23 October 2014 postponement of the 2015 transfer of wartime operational control from the United States back to South Korea. Progressives asserted that this would not persuade North Korea to enter into military trust-building measures without the kind of adjustment in the South Korea-United States alliance, and that the decision impacted the functioning of NAPCI. The argument continues that South Korea’s independence could contribute to easing tension the United States and China, rather than perpetuating trilateral military agreements between the United States, South Korea, and Japan. (Yonhap 2016) Most progressives have accused the Park government of being able to implement NAPCI because of the administration’s relationship with the United States, and its negative reactions toward the North after January 2016. In particular, the October 2015 declaration while visiting the United States, that
South Korea to be a “key partner in the US’s Asia-Pacific rebalancing policy”, was contradictory to the goals of NAPCI, and that South Korea’s ties with China and Russia were being severely strained after the announcement of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Air Defense) discussions between Washington and Seoul. In short, the progressive media has continued to suggest that peace on the peninsula is being threatened by an increasingly entrenched New Cold War order in Northeast Asia, and the Park administration is playing the role of catalyst and vanguard.

Conclusion

The successes of NAPCI have improved regional cooperation. However, despite the pragmatic efforts on the Park of the Park Geun Hye administration to implement NAPCI, the primary barrier has been the continuation of the North Korean nuclear weapons program, which included the latest and fifth nuclear detonation on 9 September 2016, and China’s responses within the region. The personal chemistry between Park Geun Hye and Xi Jinping, has not transferred to a strategic change in the region. A key element in the NAPCI concept was South Korea’s notion that closer relations with China would produce greater coordination on the North Korea nuclear issue. Despite agreeing to “full and complete implementation” of UN Resolution 2270 following North Korea’s fifth nuclear test, Beijing has remained a reluctant partner in addressing nuclear proliferation by the Kim Jong Un regime. China has expressed concerns about the deployment of THAAD on the Korean peninsula, characterizing it as a threat to its security, but has failed to impact the provocative behavior of North Korea.


