

This opinion piece by Spencer H. Kim appeared in the Korea Times on November 18th 2013.

President should reach out to political foes

By Spencer H. Kim



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I had very interesting discussions recently with two men I deeply admire. Upon reflection, both men's remarks led me to the conclusion above: great leaders are great because they prepared for a better future in some way. Those that just marched in place we seem to forget.

We have two new leaders in Korea — South and North — who have just come to power. The greatness, or failure, of President Park Geun-hye and Kim Jong-un will be judged by history on how well they saw the future and prepared Korea to prosper in that future.

Donald Gregg, former US ambassador to Korea and now chairman of the Pacific Century Institute, was recently in Seoul at a celebration of 60 years of the US-ROK alliance. Amb. Gregg told me that in his career he was honored to know personally what he believed to be the three greatest South Korean presidents — Park Chung-hee, Roh Tae-woo and Kim Dae-jung. Each in his way prepared South Korea to advance into the future. Park ended poverty and started an economic miracle; Roh cemented a transition from authoritarianism to democracy and opened the ROK to China and Russia; Kim closed the wounds left by authoritarianism, refocused the economy after the IMF crisis, and showed that there were ways to work

Amb. Gregg said that whether President Park Geun-hye is remembered as great or not will depend on whether she can successfully launch "Trustpolitik." It struck me that President Park and Kim Jong-un have been given the sacred duty of preparing the Korean peninsula for the 21st century — a century of challenges in which a squabbling Korea peninsula would be at a great disadvantage.

Perhaps the outcome would not be as dire as the humiliation of colonization and the tragedy of civil war that resulted when Korea's factionalized and weak leaders at the

end of the 19th century failed to prepare for the 20th century. But it seems to me that the sooner a level of trust can be established between North and South, the sooner a basic strategy for the coming century can be worked out.

The rise of China, climate change, the internationalization and digitalization of economies, bioengineering, and many other trends that we cannot yet even foresee will dominate the future. Flexibility will be the key to adapting and prospering. Much is now unknown, but we can say with certainty that the history of that future will not be kind to those who entered it with their hands tied by divisiveness and constant strategic uncertainty. They will be the losers of their times, just as Koreans were for too much of the 20th century.

My other conversation was with Volker Ruhe, a politician of the conservative party in Germany, the Christian Democratic Union, who was deeply involved in East-West issues. Volker recently visited Pyongyang and has studied the Korean situation in the context of Germany's experience. The former defense minister told me that it was his conclusion that the most important thing that has to happen if there is to be progress in Korea is that the progressive and conservative political elements in the South have to come to an agreement on the general thrust of a policy toward the North. As long as it is a fundamentally divisive issue, with policy reversals following elections, no real progress can be made.

In Germany the progressive party began the "Ostpolitik" policy but it worked to bring the conservative party on board. It became joint policy that the stronger Germany, the West, should make the accommodations and compromises that pushed forward a process of controlled rapprochement.

The architects of Ostpolitik, the Chancellors from the Social Democratic Party, Willy Brandt and then Helmut Schmidt, made a special effort to engage and include the opposition party as they carried out their policy. When the Christian Democrats returned to power their leader, Chancellor Helmut Kohl, not only continued Ostpolitik but infused it with fresh ideas that increased East-West economic cooperation. Kohl became the hero of smooth unification. Instead of being the sick man of Europe, Germany is now its leader for the 21st century.

The recent headlines in Seoul show how far South Koreans are from trusting each other, or agreeing with each other, on a fundamental policy for engaging the North to prepare for the 21st century.

If she is to be remembered as great, President Park has not only to implement Trustpolitik with the North, she has to launch a domestic Trustpolitik with

progressives. Only then can she have a chance to begin preparing Korea for the coming century of challenges.

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