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The South Korean Presidential Election 2012 and the possible renewal of Inter-Korean Relations

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The South Korean presidential election campaign has certainly heated up since [Dr. Ahn Cheol-soo](#), a medical doctor and professor (but, better known as an innovative computer anti-virus software developer in Korea) [announced in September his surprising intention to run for office](#). This upcoming election can best be summarised as a triangular contest between Moon Jae-in, Park Geun-hye, and Ahn Cheol-soo. Because of this chaotic three-side struggle it is difficult to identify who will be the next leader of South Korea. So for this reason, this article will not discuss the specific political ideas of the three candidates. It would be more proper to consider the general aspects of upcoming election.

To be specific, we need to focus on the implication of election in the

inter-Korean relations. Regardless of the result of election, the new administration of Seoul will change its policy toward North Korea, and Pyongyang will need to decide its new approach towards South Korea, too.

As in the past, the presidential election in South Korea will be a turning point for South Korea's policy toward North Korea. Soon after the last election in 2007, Lee Myungbak, the current President, faced a North Korean threat in the West Sea of Korea and managed [the confrontational relationship with Pyongyang](#) by cutting South Korea's economic cooperation with, and contribution to, North Korea. North Korea responded with military actions in the border area between the two Koreas, mainly focussing on the Northern Limit Line of West Sea. In short, the two Koreas returned completely to the antagonism of the Cold War. With both Seoul and Pyongyang rarely making a conciliatory gesture toward each other. However, the change of leadership in both sides would be a major driving force for new relations. The Kim Jung-un regime is refraining from taking any clear action toward Seoul and is observing the South Korean situation carefully. Moreover, the three candidates agree that Seoul should improve its relations with Pyongyang and hence reduce the threat of war in the Korean Peninsula. Even Ms. Park, representing the conservatives of South Korea and [a daughter of Park Chung-hee](#) (a South Korean president who ruled South Korea for two decades with a strong anti-communist policy), advocates a 'flexible' Northern policy. Her experience of a visit to North Korea in 2002 could also help her manage a more flexible policy toward Pyongyang than President Lee. With Moon and Ahn representing the liberals in South Korea, both would want to make [more dramatic development for inter-Korean relations](#) than Park.

North Korea's strategy around the election is another important issue: will Kim Jung-un and his advisors test a new administration of South Korea with their 'traditional' measure; military action? In contrast to their dynamics in their domestic politics and military leadership, Kim Jung-un and other North Korean elites did not make any significant military action against the South. Regrettably, however, such a lack of aggression at this moment does not mean that the young leader of Pyongyang will open the North Korean economy and give up the military option in the future. Rather, Pyongyang might see no benefit from its military action against Seoul a few months before the election since the present Lee Myungbak administration keeps a confrontational stance to North Korea, and its military action at this moment could undermine the liberal voice in South Korea which encourages the presidential candidates to consider South Korea's economic contribution to Pyongyang. But, on the other hands, the North Korean leadership would consider a demonstration of power around the election in order to raise the 'price of peace' and boast the superiority of Kim Jung-un to the new leader of South Korea for its domestic power game. In this sense, the North Korean leadership could make some changes in its military approach to the South. Over a decade, North Korea's ground and naval forces focused its operation on the west coast of peninsula which is close to South Korea's capital city, Seoul. Clearly, due to such geographic aspects, [the military conflict in the West Sea](#) produced a huge impact. Yet the continuous aggressions in the west coast also made South Korea tighten its security in the area. Simply put, it is highly possible that North Korean naval forces would be defeated by South Korean forces that have prepared for the combat in the West Sea around the election. In this sense, North Korea would have to change its target of military action, e.g. the East Sea. The East Sea of Korea is not a new target of North Korean military: in fact, it was a popular sector of North Korean guerrilla operations in the late 1960s and submarine operations in the 1990s. If North Korea initiates a large-scale naval action, probably a submarine operation, in the East Sea, then it is more difficult for South Korea to defend its coast. Furthermore, because [there is a territorial dispute over an island in the East Sea of Korea. North Korea can claim the justification of its military action in the](#)

[east coast](#).^[1] Clearly and more importantly, the perception of the new South Korean leadership in North Korean aggression and dictatorship could define the new relationship between Seoul and Pyongyang. So Pyongyang would also make a decision on its Southern policy based on South Korea's response to North Korean aggressions.

The presidential election in 2012 provides a platform for new inter-Korean relations. Because of the series of military conflict during Lee administration, the presidential candidates consider the improvement of relations between the two Koreas that would be one of the major political challenges for their competition and during the presidential tenure of the winner. North Korea's military actions until 2011 deteriorated South Korean public's credit to the Lee government, and the candidates paid a keen attention to [the impact of inter-Korean conflicts](#) on the public idea for last five years. Regardless of the results of election, the new Presidential administration of South Korea will push for a rapprochement. However, if the North Korean leadership plans and resumes military actions, one of the most efficient methods of communication for Pyongyang, then the response of South Korea will be different according to the nature of new government. Simply put, the rapprochement process will be stagnated.

^[1]Like South Korea, the North Korean constitution claims its sovereignty over an entire Korean peninsula and annexed islands around it. In this legal sense, Pyongyang is allowed to join the territorial dispute between South Korea and Japan.

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