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Report from Korea's Presidential Inaugural

Ambassador Mark Minton, President of The Korea Society

Mark Minton:

This is Mark Minton, President of The Korea Society.

Ambassador Thomas Hubbard, Chairman of The Korea Society, and I were privileged to be guests at Madame Park Geun-hye's inauguration as eighteenth-term president of the Republic of Korea on Monday, February 25, 2013.

President Park has a rather unusual background, as she is the daughter of President Park Chung-hee, military dictator of South Korea during the 1960s and 1970s. She will now be returning to the place she lived as a teenager, the presidential Blue House. After her mother was assassinated by North Korean agents, Madame Park took over the duties of First Lady. That's a rather unusual résumé for a president. She, of course, is Korea's first elected female president. I think it's fair to say that, despite the rather unusual background associated with her father's regime, she has come into her own as a national leader, this being represented by both her election as President and her inauguration yesterday.

The inaugural ceremony lasted about two hours, and was held on the plaza in front of the National Assembly building. Tens of thousands of people attended and, of course, the event was televised in Korea and throughout much of the world. In her acceptance speech, President Park spoke about beginning a "new era of hope." On the surface, that might seem like a typical inaugural speech. I believe there are several, significant points of departure about her vision for Korea embedded in that speech.

At the beginning of the speech, she gave pride of place to a higher phase of economic development for Korea through applying the latest developments in science and technology; including developments in nanotechnology, digital technology, and IT technology. President Park spoke of building a "Second Miracle on the Han [River]," which represents a vision of economic success for Korea based on the shrewd use of this technology. I think that's a rather significant policy objective, and it is backed by her creation of a new ministerial Cabinet position that specifically promotes new technologies within the Korean economy. She has already appointed a new minister to this post. That was the first point that struck me.

The second point is she spoke several times, in the speech, about a "new era of happiness" for the Korean people. I think hard-edged policy types, used to dealing with security or economic affairs, might at first think that this is just rhetoric for an inaugural address but I believe it was heartfelt, and I think it speaks to the yearning of the Korean people for a more secure life, now that South Korea has become a developed country.

There was great mention, during the presidential campaign, of growing inequalities of income and social position in Korea because of the way the Korean economy is developing; where so much is based upon a few, very large conglomerates. Korea is known, in international trade, for its products from these very large

combines, and the speech put a lot of emphasis on developing small and medium industries, as well as creating what we would call a "social safety net."

There was nothing explicit about that in terms of what she plans to do, but there was a clear promise that she would advance policies leading to the greater happiness of the Korean people. I think she was speaking to a real perceived desire, on the part of the Korean people, to revise their society in a way that, perhaps, does not pursue economic development in a headlong fashion (as has been the case in the last thirty years). There's now, obviously, a greater concern for equality, access to educational opportunity, and preservation of the environment, and she spoke to all of that.

I believe the part of the speech concerning security matters was significant, as well. It was the last, major issue that she mentioned. She indicated, as she did in the campaign (and this is a quote from her inaugural speech) that she intended to "lay the groundwork for an era of harmonious unification where all Koreans can lead more prosperous and freer lives and where their dreams can come true."

Now that sounds like pretty highfalutin rhetoric, but the next phrase was that she would "move forward step-by-step," to pursue that goal, "on the basis of credible deterrence to build trust between the South and the North," pointing out that North Korea must give up its nuclear ambitions. I think this indicates that although she's very open to a new effort at diplomacy with North Korea, it will neither be on the basis of meeting North Korean demands, nor on the basis of a tepid reaction to any North Korean threats—should North Korea pursue relations with the South during her tenure in that manner.

It was very muted, but a clear marker was laid down that she means to preserve the security of the Republic of Korea from any threat, and I think this is also backed up by certain practical steps she has taken. People with military backgrounds have prominent visibility in her administration, and she has appointed a security advisory group composed of retired senior military officers. I think that she takes security very seriously.

Yesterday evening, there was a banquet at the presidential Blue House attended by mostly foreign visitors. I'd like to make just a few comments about that. President Park was very gracious, and made further remarks along the same lines that she had made at the swearing-in ceremony at the National Assembly.

The American delegation at the inaugural was led by National Security Advisor Tom Donilon from the White House, US Ambassador to Korea Sung Kim, the Combined Forces commander in Korea General Thurman, and Danny Russell from the National Security Council staff. There were other Americans present, including business and academic people.

One of the most noticeable things about the foreign delegations at the inaugural was the high-level presence of the Japanese delegation. This is especially remarkable because the delegation included two former prime ministers: Prime Minister Fukuda and Prime Minister Mori, along with a very impressive group of National Diet politicians. I think that is a clear signal that Japan is eager to improve ties with the Republic of Korea at the beginning of Madame Park's presidency.

All in all, it was a very impressive day. She was very impressive. There were film clips of her life, including a film clip of her singing. She had a nice, informal, warm manner which contrasted a little bit with the official inaugural style of former Korean presidents. I think she made a very good impression. I think it was also, in terms of policy, diplomatic symbolism, and the representation of other countries a very successful event.

Those are just some first impressions from a fly on the wall at the Korean inauguration on February 25 in Seoul.

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