

A new US administration and a proposal to bolster the ROK-US alliance by Shin Bum-cheol

Shin Bum-cheol is a Research Fellow at the Korea Institute of Defense Analysis (KIDA). He was a Senior Policy Advisor to the Defense Minister (2009-2010) and Director General for Policy Planning, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2013-2016). This article originally appeared in "ROK Angle", published by KIDA on Dec. 27, 2016.

Nov. 8, 2016 was a historical date for the United States when Donald Trump, a much controversial figure known for his unique style of speech, won the presidential election. During his campaign, Trump took a very different approach from a traditional US administration or "ordinary" US politicians. He did not hesitate to mention sensitive topics such as South Korea's alliance burden-sharing, China's pressure on North Korea's nuclear program, and a potential sit-down with Kim Jong Un over some hamburgers. News of Trump's election victory was greeted by South Koreans with great surprise.

Fortunately, President-elect Trump has already begun to change. During his recent phone call with the president of South Korea, Trump emphasized the importance of the blood-forged ROK-US alliance and won the heart of Koreans with carefully chosen words. With regards to some current international issues - although the recent discussions about Russia aren't helping - he has been showing leadership and a readiness to act in the best interest of the US. Trump has changed and proven to be a more reliable figure compared to candidate Trump or president-elect Trump immediately following the election. Confidence of ROK citizens in the steady development of the ROK-US alliance is getting stronger as a result.

Challenges for the ROK-US alliance

The ROK-US alliance has evolved tremendously for over 60 years since the Korean War. For ROK citizens, the alliance is precious, indispensable and irreplaceable. It has contributed greatly in ensuring the peace and stability of the ROK and has deterred North Korea's military threats; no other country can replace the US. This positive view is also prevalent among citizens of the US. The ROK-US alliance is perceived to have contributed to the US national interest thanks to its deeply rooted shared values of democracy, market economy, and human rights. According to one influential public survey, this positive view continues to grow and spread in the US.

Through persistent efforts between the ROK and US governments, the scale and depth of the alliance has been upgraded to another level. Consistent collaboration continues among key players surrounding the Korean Peninsula for putting greater pressure on North Korea to solve nuclear

issues. Also, the alliance has taken serious steps toward strengthening extended deterrence in defense of the ROK against such threats. The alliance's joint efforts go far beyond the Korean Peninsula as our two countries aim to reinforce a global partnership in areas such as nuclear security, development cooperation and even the Arctic. Moreover, the scope of partnership will expand to space, cyber, and health security - new frontiers of cooperation.

Before the launch of the Trump administration, the ROK-US alliance is challenged by a set of "uncertainties." First, the new administration's East Asia policy is unclear. Trump's administration is predicted to take a rather aggressive position in its policy toward China, which naturally casts doubts over the US-China relationship. In addition, US policy toward the DPRK remains vague as well. It is unclear whether Trump will pursue an engagement policy and lower the bar to negotiations with Pyongyang. On the other hand, the US may well apply extreme military pressure on North Korea and solve issues with sheer force. It could also just remain as is. Its policy direction is simply unknown.

Second, South Korean political instability, the next ROK government's policies toward the alliance, and North Korean relations all create more doubts. Given the current political situation which involves the potential impeachment of President Park, fine tuning of important policies such as the ROK-US alliance, North Korea relations, and policy coordination appear to South Korea as enormous challenges.

Finally, North Korea's reaction remains unpredictable. Despite attempts by the ROK or the US to lower the bar to reinstate talks for denuclearization of North Korea, both countries may have to acknowledge that the North does not hesitate to present itself as a de-facto nuclear weapons state. This could lead to an awkward situation where the ROK and the US continue to experience difficulties in coordinating policies while leaving North Korea's voice unheard. Therefore, it is imperative that the ROK and the US eliminate all uncertainties that may rise from alliance policies and maintain a strong bond even under the new administration.

Proposal for stronger ROK-US alliance

Unilateral intention or efforts will not hold an alliance together. Allies must sail in the same direction and make coordinated efforts toward shared goals. The ROK-US alliance is no exception. Both governments and their citizens need to mutually respect one another, coordinate policies, and prioritize each other's interest to create the strongest alliance.

The concept of "mutual respect" must remain deeply embedded in the alliance. South Korea does not have to raise

unnecessary concerns over President-elect Trump. Most of Trump's images and figures are depictions of mainstream media outlets, and his true capabilities are yet to be proven. In the past, the US media was doubtful about how well President Reagan, a former actor, would be capable of executing his duties. Reagan made significant achievements. With all fairness, President-elect Trump also possesses great possibilities. Likewise, it is not wise to make current Korean political scandals appear any bigger than they are. If the US truly respects the choice of Korean citizens, the best thing to do is to observe how South Korea overcomes this situation.

It is often noted that the ROK-US alliance experienced difficulties under President Roh Moo Hyun. In fact, the deployment to Iraq, the relocation of US Forces Korea, and the ROK-U.S. free trade agreement are some memorable results that occurred under Roh. Often, it is lack of mutual understanding and consideration that causes many difficulties.

In addition, the two countries must harmonize policies more thoroughly. Over the next couple of years, South Korea and the US have many agendas that need to be resolved. From the alliance's perspective, defense burden-sharing, practical improvement of extended deterrence, and transfer of OPCON are some of the major issues. In addition, on-going issues such as deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Aerial Defense (THAAD) missile defense system and the ROK-Japan GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement) can also resurface depending on changes in South Korean politics. How the two countries deal with North Korean nuclear issues and relevant policies may pose substantial problems. If the Trump administration and the new ROK government cannot come to agreement with regard to policies toward North Korea, it is inevitable that the ROK-U.S. alliance will suffer a negative impact. Thus, the two countries should always try to make room for each other to reach mutually beneficial outcomes. Take defense burden-sharing for example. Both countries need extensive knowledge to understand where the other country is coming from. Answering "Why does Washington feel it is necessary for Seoul to contribute more?" or "What makes Seoul believe it is already paying its fair share" is impossible unless both sides have comprehensive knowledge of the differences in each other's position. If the two countries are willing to listen and make mutual concessions through extensive prior consultations, I have no doubt that the alliance can overcome any difficulties.

Finally, reconsidering the priority of the North Korean nuclear issue in US foreign policies is critical. For South Korea, the North Korean nuclear problem is of utmost priority when setting foreign and security policies. The US has made extensive efforts to try to solve the same problem. However, it is necessary to give a much higher priority to this issue to deter threats from the North and find solutions to the problems that only expand over time. There are voices from both countries that wish they had given this issue a greater priority equivalent to that of Iranian nuclear problem. If Trump understands that the situation on the Korean Peninsula could have been better if the US had taken a more active stance in

the past, he may be able to arrive at a much more peaceful and stable Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia.

Launching a new US administration has always created new challenges and opportunities for South Korea's security. Citizens of the ROK expect the new Trump administration to take the ROK-US alliance one step further and maintain the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, people would like to see the North Korean nuclear issue resolved, and global cooperation expanded. I can only imagine it is the same for the US. And, it would be in the best interest of the ROK and the US to meet the expectations of citizens in both countries through meticulous care and continued efforts.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.