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Risks for the ROK-U.S. Alliance: Half-Baked Deal on North Korean Denuclearization[1)]

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I speculate on where the U.S. alliance is going and where it will be in 10 to 20 years. To do a half way decent job of surveying the two countries' bilateral relations, I have to do some hopscotching of the past 140 years of history.

As you know, the United States and the Kingdom of Chosun signed in 1882 a "treaty of peace, amity, commerce, and navigation," dubbed as the Shufeldt Treaty. The United States wished to partake in the imperialistic and exploratory enterprise of other powers including Britain, France, Russia and China. The Kingdom of Korea saw the United States as a lever against other powers, especially China and Japan in the new jungle of imperialistic competition.

Afterwards, even though the United States did not act as

1) Speech delivered at *Workshop on the US-ROK Alliance: Alternative Futures* organized by Stimson Center and 38 North, Hankook University of Foreign Studies, and The Korean Association of International Studies, January 15-16, 2020, Seoul.

harboring territorial ambitions over Korea, neither did it have the will, intention, or ability to prevent other powers from encroaching on the helpless Chosun Kingdom.

In the infamous (in Korea at least) Taft-Katsura memorandum of 1905, the United States endorsed Japan's dominance of Korea. In return, Japan accepted U.S.'s dominance of the Philippines. The United States did not develop anything approaching vital strategic interest in Korea in the nineteenth century. Japan's outright annexation of Korea in 1910 followed. The United States did not object to the sorry state of Korea.

The outbreak of the Second World War in 1940 did nothing to arouse interest in or concern regarding the Korean situation. It was only after the Japanese surrender in August 1945, that the United States, became involved, if inadvertently, in Korean affairs. It did so by a divided occupation of the Korean Peninsula with the Soviet Union.

The war that the North Koreans precipitated with the help of the Soviets prompted U.S. participation as a U.N. "collective defense force." Toward the end of a three year devastating war, in which more than 37,000 American lives were lost, the United States signed an armistice with North Korea and China in July 1953.

The South Korean government of Syngman Rhee was not happy with the truce without unification. Only a few in the U.S. grumbled about ending the war without a "total victory."

The United States sought to coax the Rhee government to accept the armistice with a mutual defense treaty between the United States and the Republic of Korea. Many regarded the U.S. promise of a military alliance with South Korea was meant to be a consolation price for

recalcitrant Syngman Rhee. However, the cold fact was that the U.S. had already decided on an alliance pact with South Korea as a part of its global containment policy *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union.

For the United States, the need for such an alliance was quite obvious for a number of reasons: The Soviet Union had to be contained; North Korea had to be deterred; Japan needed to be defended; and the U.S. needed a forward base in the Asian continent. On South Korea's part, it needed to build up defense and economy against the North Korean threat. It needed a strong sponsor and supporter in the international arena of diplomacy and security.

Today, more than sixty years later, much of the same rationale for U.S.-ROK alliance remain germane. But there are changed circumstances as well. China has replaced the Soviet Union as the U.S.'s main rival in the region. North Korea has nuclear and missile capabilities that threaten continental U.S.A.

Today, risks for U.S.-ROK alliance come mainly from two corners: President Trump in the United States and President Moon Jae-in in South Korea. Trump and Moon seem to operate on the basis of illusions (self-generated on ideological basis, such as peace economy and peace momentum) and delusions (politically motivated false image such as North Korean denuclearization sold to others and base supporters).

The "Trump risk" comes in many forms and shapes. Trump has low regards for American allies and alliance itself. He thinks alliance is a one-way street where the United States helps other countries (or peoples) to defend them from their enemies and the United States gets little or nothing in return except for financial compensation.

For trump, his gut feelings tell him what decisions will help best to keep and consolidate his political base and help win elections at home. He does not seem to know or understand that alliances help protect and defend not only America's allies but also the United States itself.

President Moon Jae-in of South Korea does not act as a reliable alliance partner from the U.S.'s point of view. His priority policy objective seems to be improving relations with North Korea and promoting what he calls "peace economy" in cooperation with North Korea. Despite Kim Jong-un's renunciation of his commitment for "denuclearization," President Moon is trying to persuade other powers to relax or lift existing sanctions on North Korea. He is at the forefront of working on an "end of war declaration" in Korea, despite the fact that such a declaration would weaken the rationale for U.S.-Korea alliance and its troops maintenance in Korea.

I have a concern that President Trump, sooner than later, is likely to decide to make what he will call a great deal on North Korean nuclear weapons. President Moon is apt to support such a half-baked deal as something that is helpful for what he considers peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Even in the midst of seemingly escalating mutual denunciations and recriminations, both the United States and North Korea take pains to keep the possibility of deal-making alive.

The United States presumably wants a "big deal" for North Korean denuclearization. On the other hand, North Korea wants the United States to take the North Korean offer of a "smaller" deal.

Now (that is, January 2020), we are at about the middle point between the failed Hanoi meeting in last February and the U.S. presidential election in coming November.

But the inevitable and inconvenient fact still remains. That is: North Korea will not accept a big deal with concrete measures that specify a complete ending of its nuclear program. When it comes to nuclear weapons, it has always resorted to brinkmanship, salami tactics, back-loading of decisive measures, and deceptions. On President Trump's part, with the 2020 Presidential election approaching (less than one year away from now), he needs some success in deal-making, at least something he can spin as a good deal even if it really isn't.

With the North Korean economy suffering from the continuing economic squeeze with sanctions, the value of a deal has increased for Kim Jong-un even though he does not admit it. So, both Trump and Kim Jong-un want a deal.

There is still a good possibility of North Korea and the United States coming to a compromise solution: a deal that looks like a "big-deal" but will consist of a few installments to be implemented in "step by step" fashion. That would satisfy both the U.S.'s "Big deal" requirement and North Korea's succession of "small deals" insistence. Some kind of an umbrella (or framework) "agreement" that looks and sounds like a big deal accompanied by the first installment of concrete measures in return for partial relaxation of sanctions (probably involving North-South Korean economic cooperation and exchanges) will probably do the job.

Trump will claim that he got what no previous U.S. president got —a North Korean promise to fully denuclearize. Kim Jong-un knows that

the full denuclearization will neither need nor will be implemented. Kim has no reason to reject such a deal if it will save North Korean economy from collapse. South Korea's Moon government would be happy to accept such a "deal" even though it does not promise complete denuclearization of North Korea. Such a deal portends the danger (or risk) of recognizing the North Korean nuclear status quo and putting off North Korea's complete denuclearization if it ever takes place to an indefinite future.

There are other risks that Presidents Trump and Moon will present for the U.S.-ROK alliance.

I just speculated on one – a half-baked deal on North Korean denuclearization which will not give comfort to the Koreans or the Americans, if not their respective governments of the moment.

Sometimes, there are "defining issues" that can determine the alliance maintenance and continuity. In the case of ANZUS, in 1985, there was the issue of *USS Buchanan*, which was about whether nuclear weapons laden U.S. vessels could enter New Zealand ports. The issue was the reason for the departure of New Zealand from ANZUS. In 1991, the Senate of the Philippines requested U.S. departure from Subic Bay and Clark Air Force Base. In both cases, the countries that mishandled the defining issue (New Zealand and the Philippines) later regretted what had happened and brought the U.S. ships and planes back to their countries. In the ROK-U.S. alliance, GSOMIA almost became such an issue. But the two countries narrowly avoided a real alliance crisis. We have to watch out for such possible risks.

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저자 소개

한승주 교수는 현재 고려대 명예교수이다. 한국 정부의 외교부 장관(1993-94) 및 주미대사(2003-2005)를 역임하였으며, 유엔사무총장 특별대표(사이프러스 담당)(1996-97), 유엔 르완다 인종학살 조사위원(1999), 동아시아비전그룹 공동의장(2000-2001)을 수행하였다. 고려대학교 정치외교학과 교수(1978-2006)로 재직하였으며, 고려대 일민국제관계연구원장(1995-2003), 고려대 총장서리(2002, 2006-2007)를 역임하였다. 주요 저서로는 「Korean Diplomacy in an Era of Globalization」(1995), 「Korea in a Changing World」(1995), 「Changing Values in Asia」(1999) 등이 있다. (Email: hansjrok@gmail.com)

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