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# Lessons from 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the ROK-U.S. Alliance

**Chung, Sung-Yoon**

**(Director, Unification Policy Research Division)**

We celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the ROK-U.S. alliance on October 1, 2023. The purpose of this paper is to present the value and lessons of the alliance by reflecting on the birth, process, and present of the 70 year-long ROK-U.S. alliance. It was President Rhee Syngman's strategic insight and decision that led to the birth of the ROK-U.S. alliance, and we are still in the shadow of this partnership. In the history of international politics, it is very unusual for an alliance to last for 70 years, since on average close partnership between countries lasts only nine years. This paper will focus on and point to common goals and values, creation and distribution of achievements, and a strong determination to defend as the most important reasons behind this long-standing ROK-U.S. alliance that boasts its longevity. Equally important factor that contributed to the continuation of the alliance is that both countries successfully overcame and managed the crisis of rift between them. Another precious achievement stemming from the 70 year-long ROK-U.S. alliance is that based on our economic growth and strategic benefits, and balance of power within the region, we have created both capabilities and an environment to pursue a ROK-led peaceful unification. Although there is no denying the ROK-U.S. alliance has played a critical role in ROK's resplendent history, it is right to assess that our leader and peoples' strong determination and sacrifices led the evolution and protection of the ROK-U.S. alliance. We should be proud of ourselves because it is us who have nurtured the ROK-U.S. alliance over 70 years.

## 1. The Birth of the ROK-U.S. Alliance: A Leader's Strategic Insight and Judgment

The ROK-U.S. alliance is a legacy of former ROK President Rhee Syngman. As we celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ROK-U.S. alliance, it is worth applying the so-called “counterfactual thinking”: Would this alliance have been born without strategic thinking and judgment by President Lee? Although it cannot be said that all the achievements we have made today are the result of the ROK-U.S. alliance, we cannot deny the fact that the assets we cherish, including liberal democracy, economic accomplishments, and cultural excellence, have been made possible on the back of the bilateral partnership with the U.S. In this sense, as this year marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ROK-U.S. alliance, we may be still in the shadow of our leader's concerns and insight. This is why we need to ruminate over our previous leader's courage and wisdom before turning to the significance and achievements of the ROK-U.S. alliance.

The ROK-U.S. alliance was conceived in the middle of difficult truce negotiations since July 1951. Sworn in January 1953, Eisenhower's presidential pledge was “early armistice in the Korean War.” He said, “Support from Korean people is needed to effectively observe the armistice agreement, and in order to gain that support, swift negotiations to conclude a defense treaty between the ROK and U.S. must precede.” However, the U.S. was reluctant to President Lee's proposal on account of territorial issue on the Korean Peninsula and a possibility of the communist army's opposition to ceasefire talks. In order to change the will of the U.S., President Lee vehemently put pressure on Eisenhower by saying ROK could pull itself out of the UN forces and continue to fight in the Korean War without the help of foreign troops. At the same time, as part of negotiations with the U.S., President Lee suggested both parties could sign a ROK-U.S mutual defense treaty first, and then work on a ceasefire. Eisenhower finally decided to ink a security treaty with ROK on May 30, 1953 and informed ROK of their intention on June 6.

As the U.S. showed a lukewarm attitude and did not come up with follow-up measures, President Lee took a bold step by releasing 27,000 anticommunist POWs on June 18, 1953, with a view to forcing U.S. to take action. On June 19, he reaffirmed his position in a letter to President Eisenhower that before signing the armistice a

mutual defense treaty between ROK and U.S. must be concluded. Faced with dogged determination by ROK, the U.S. administration shifted its position and started vibrant negotiations with ROK. President Lee sent a letter again to the U.S., which read, “The Korean Army will be under the leadership of the UN forces on the condition that their activities are not against national benefits of ROK. ROK will neither sign the ceasefire nor interfere with it, and agree to sign a mutual defense treaty with the U.S. after the armistice is made.” On July 12, the U.S. and ROK announced a joint statement saying “mutual defense treaty negotiation is in progress,” which led to a historic signing of the ROK-US mutual defense treaty on October 1.<sup>1)</sup>

Since the ROK-U.S. alliance is the outcome of the Korean War that lasted 1129 days, it is fair to say the armistice system and the bilateral partnership are twin brothers born out of the Korean War. It is ironic that the ROK-U.S. alliance was also an outcome of strategic opposition to an armistice declaration, with an aim of defending the armistice system. Without the insight and judgment of President Lee, who accurately diagnosed the context of international politics of powerful countries at the time, the ROK-U.S. alliance may not have been formed. President Lee did not take his eyes off the ball: the death of Stalin in 1953; the emergence of the Eisenhower administration with presidential pledge of early ceasefire; and the fact that powerful countries, including China, which was spending extravagant war expenditure immediately after the establishment of its government, expressed their support for the armistice. President Lee, who was reading powers’ intention, strategically forced the U.S. to make a decision by refusing to take part in the truce talks and sign the armistice agreement.<sup>2)</sup> The ROK-U.S. alliance was established due in no small part to one leader’s strategic judgment and actions.

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1) The ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty went into effect on November 18, 1954 following the ROK-U.S. Summit in July

2) At the time, the U.S. had to hold back the Lee administration while deterring DPRK’s reinvasion.

## 2. The Significance of the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the ROK-U.S. Alliance

### Reasons for the continuation of the ROK-US alliance

It is worth looking at why ROK and the U.S. decided to establish the bilateral alliance and their respective understanding of it as we commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Looking at why the U.S. decided to ally with ROK in 1953 provides profound implications on why a great power pursues an alliance. At the time, the U.S. had three goals: it aimed to counter the Soviet Union's expansion, deter DPRK's reinvasion, and defend Japan. Making ROK an exemplary country for democracy and economic development was an equally important mission for the U.S. because ROK is their hard-won outcome after huge sacrifices during the Korean War. In order to deter the 2<sup>nd</sup> Korean war and China's military intervention, ROK also desperately needed strong and solid support from the U.S. Put differently, the background of the establishment of the ROK-U.S. alliance lies in the fact that they needed each other 70 years ago to achieve vital strategic goals.

As with all alliances, establishing such partnership is one thing and maintaining it is another. Research shows defense treaties on average last only nine and a half years in the history of international politics.<sup>3)</sup> There is an obvious reason why the ROK-U.S. alliance has lasted for 70 years despite unprecedented changes in international politics over the past seven decades. To put that into perspective, why ROK and the U.S. has maintained their alliance may provide an important context for assessing the 70-year long partnership. First of all, the U.S. still maintains two core goals, which are balancing power between powerful countries in Asia and maintaining its leadership in the region. As such, the U.S. needs to continue to deter DPRK's nuclear capabilities and defend Japan. In addition, a situation has been created in which defending ROK not only serves security purposes but delivers economic benefits.

ROK must maintain the alliance with the U.S. to curb DPRK's belligerence and nuclear capabilities. In particular, in the context of the international situation where networks

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<sup>3)</sup> Melvin Small & J David Singer, "Formal Alliance, 1816-1965: An Extension of the Basic Data," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1969).

for value, security, and economic benefits are getting more complex and converged, the alliance with the U.S. helps us ensure sustainable security and economic growth. In case where the ROK-US alliance dissolves or increasingly deteriorates, ROK will have to not only spend a huge amount of military spending but also endure serious difficulties in maintaining national competitiveness in an increasingly competitive economic security environment. On a diplomatic front, ROK can expect the ironclad alliance with the US. will help strengthen ROK's position in relations with neighboring countries such as Japan and China.

Compared to 70 years ago, some of the key reasons why the alliance was formed have disappeared or been diluted. Of course, the grounds for the alliance establishment do not necessarily provide a reason for maintaining the bilateral partnership. The Soviet Union is a case in point: although the Soviet Union collapsed, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) still exists and the content of the alliance was strengthened with more member countries compared to the Cold War period. The same holds true to the ROK-U.S. alliance: even if the denuclearization of DPRK is achieved and security threats arising from it diminish, the necessity and value of the ROK-U.S. alliance can be reproduced or expanded at any time for various reasons, whether it be for pursuing balance and stability of the region, for common economic benefits that both countries seek, or for strengthening ROK's position in diplomatic relations with neighboring countries.

With that said, we cannot rule out the possibility of the alliance breaking up suddenly, a situation that will render the 70-year long alliance in vein. This is because there are no permanent friends in international relations. More often than not, there have been cases where alliances, which were established on clear and sufficient grounds, became weak or even dissolved due to other factors. In the 1960s and 1970s, we witnessed the exposure of strategic cacophony between the U.S. and France, the conflict between China and the Soviet Union, and the diplomatic rupture between the U.S. and Taiwan.<sup>4)</sup> Given these lessons, there are three major challenges to the sustainability of the ROK-U.S. alliance that we can expect to occur in the future.

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<sup>4)</sup> The U.S. and Taiwan signed a mutual defense treaty in 1954. However, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter declared the abrogation of the treaty in January 1979 after recognizing the People's Republic of China as the sole legitimate government of China.

The first challenge is a case where disapproval of the people from both countries amplifies against the bilateral alliance. We cannot completely rule out such scenario because diplomacy takes up an enormous part of domestic politics in both countries. The second challenge could arise if one party arbitrarily pursue a wrong alliance policy. Some similar cases of such challenge include U.S's plan to withdraw United States Forces Korea (USFK), former President Trump's disregard for the bilateral partnership, or ROK taking its own line on nuclear armament. Lastly, interference from neighboring countries may also pose an important challenge. It is likely that both China and North Korea will continue to try to weaken the ROK-U.S. alliance, and if we stick to the previous stance where we overly expected China's influence over the North Korea nuclear issue while sending the so-called "costly signaling," it may lead to a breakdown in the ROK-U.S. alliance.<sup>5)</sup> Despite changes in alliance environment, major countries, such as most European countries, Japan, Australia, and Canada, whose national identities are similar to ours, have maintained and strengthened their alliance with the U.S. If we still have vital national interests that we want to maintain or acquire through the alliance with the United States, we should not be complacent about the history of the 70-year long alliance: we must seek ways to further solidify the bilateral partnership.

### **Historical Significance: Continuation of Bandwagon and Qualitative Shift**

If we simplify the characteristics of ROK diplomacy since its founding, it would probably be a bandwagon with the United States. Considering our diplomacy around the mid-17th century when a modern national system started to form, bandwagoning with a great power as a diplomatic policy is not a new phenomenon to us. As a small country located at the crossroad of a continent and an ocean, it was difficult for us to acquire security autonomy. In the past, Korea refrained itself from being involved in conflicts with neighboring powers to maintain the minimum level of national independence, and when necessary or unavoidable, we adopted the bandwagon of powerful countries. It was our survival strategy.

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<sup>5)</sup> An international example is a case where Russia strongly opposes the idea of Ukraine joining NATO.

We have a long diplomatic history of cooperation and bandwagoning with China, which is the absolute hegemony in Northeast Asia and grounded in Chinese nationalism. However, the impact we have received from the alliance with the U.S. for the past 70 years is different from the impact our ancestors received by siding with China in the past. While China has had continuous influence on us at political and cultural levels, the impact of the ROK-U.S. alliance has been so overwhelming that it has changed everything in a relatively short period of time. During the Cold War, where proxy wars were rampant, and the past 30 years punctuated with continued nuclear threats by DPRK, the ROK-U.S. alliance has solidly ensured our safety. Until the 1960s, the U.S. provided ROK with \$300 million in military aid every year, which accounted to about 90% of ROK's defense spending in the 1950s and 60s. The U.S. also provided economic support for our growth while implanting liberal democracy as our national identity.

What sets the ROK-U.S. alliance apart from other alliances and the subsequent implication is that there has been a qualitative shift in the bilateral partnership. As we can see from the book *History of the Peloponnesian War*, where the author Thucydides called the war eternal possession of humanity 2,500 years ago, relations between great powers and small countries have always been cold and cruel. The history of alliance between powerful countries and weak countries implicates that the former were not always generous and the latter were not always submissive. Alliance researchers named involvement and abandonment as the background for such phenomenon. Small countries were destined to face a dilemma in the so-called asymmetrical relationship. This was the longstanding and natural fate that small countries had to face.

The 70-year long ROK-U.S. alliance is not an exception. Both ROK and the U.S. had to overcome challenges which could inevitably made them involved in due to the other party. For example, the U.S. had to dissuade President Lee and President Park Chung-hee from working on their willingness to display a show of force against DPRK, and must keep tabs on ROK to prevent it from arming with nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, ROK was confronted with difficulty when they were forced to ally with the U.S. as it implemented its regional and global strategies. President Roh Moo-hyun's decision to dispatch troops to Iraq and deepening cooperation with the U.S. amid the strategic

competition between the U.S. and China are cases in point. Irrespective of involvement, abandonment too caused a serious challenge to the sustainability of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Examples include withdrawal of USFK during Nixon and Carter administrations and former President Trump's disregard for the ROK-U.S. alliance.

Against all odds, the foundation of the ROK-U.S. alliance has not been shaken. If anything, it has continued to evolve qualitatively and separates itself from other alliances. As ROK, once a small country, increased its national power, the level and content of what has been agreed in the ROK-U.S. alliance gradually increased and expanded. Shifting from an asymmetric relationship driven by a unilateral assistance, ROK-U.S. relations are evolving into a comprehensive strategic partnership at a global level. Thanks to this development, an abandonment risk by a unilateral movement of one party, which we saw in the past, has gradually decreased. A truly cooperative and mutually dependent partnership between ROK and the U.S. has evolved to a level where two countries pursue strengthened practical cooperation.

#### **Implications of International Politics: The Operation of Defensive Realism**

There may be many academic and theoretical approaches that can explain international politics in Northeast Asia. Considering the function and role of impact of the ROK-U.S. alliance over the seven decades and its impact, security order in Northeast Asia has serious implications in explaining the practicability of the so-called defensive realism, an international relations theory. As will be explained later, the ROK-U.S. alliance has played a crucial role in forming and maintaining the structural balance of power in Northeast Asia. Since discussing the practicability of paradigms of international politics is not the purpose of this paper, it is unnecessary to provide detailed and lengthy explanations and arguments. However, in order to reflect on the international political and theoretical meaning of the ROK-US alliance, the basic contents and arguments are presented as follows.

With the ROK-U.S. alliance working for the past 70 years, international politics in Northeast Asia was anarchic. In anarchic Northeast Asian relations, all actors in the region made security their top priority and such intention was particularly pronounced during the Cold War. For the past 70 years, gaining a hegemonic status has not been



the most important goal among powerful countries. Since 1961 when four major partnerships in Northeast Asia, which include the ROK-U.S. alliance, the U.S.-Japan alliance, the China-DPRK alliance, and the Russia-DPRK alliance, were established, powers in the region generally tried to maintain the existing balance of power rather than actively changing the distribution of power.

Since the ROK-U.S. alliance and the U.S.-Japan did not continuously seek to maximize their respective capabilities and the China-DPRK alliance and the Russia-DPRK alliance controlled themselves in terms of capabilities, there are some limitations on analyzing international politics in Northeast Asia from the offensive realism, with ROK-U.S. alliance in operation for the past 70 years. As such, for the past 70 years, Northeast Asian countries have relatively focused on the opponent's intention to attack and to collapse the existing balance of power. The Northeast Asia case indicates a theoretical proposition about the so-called "balance of threat," which has been emphasized by defensive realists, can be proved in Northeast Asia.

What is important to note when trying to confirm the meaning of the ROK-US alliance from the defensive realist perspective is that it is easy to explain the security dilemma in the region. Defensive realists (Van Evera, Barry R. Posen, Charles Glaser, and more) argue if a country generally sticks to offensive military policy, it is more likely to show aggressive moves, which will in turn raise the likelihood of a war. Under the ROK-U.S. alliance agreement, the most important goal is to deter and defend any invasive movements by DPRK. Keeping powerful countries from displaying military actions to change the status quo in the region is an equally important goal and effect of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Despite DPRK's repeated violations of the ceasefire agreement and military provocations, the ROK-U.S. alliance has made a positive contribution to easing the aggressiveness of the China-DPRK alliance and the Russia-DPRK alliance by refraining from military responses against DPRK and adhering to prudent military policies for the past 70 years. This means the ROK-U.S. alliance has successfully served as a stabilizer in Northeast Asia.

### 3. The Achievements of the 70-year Long ROK-U.S. Alliance

#### **Korea's increased national power and becoming an advanced nation**

The most important achievement out of the ROK-U.S. alliance is that ROK's national power has greatly increased. Over the past 70 years, the bilateral partnership has helped ROK improve its national capabilities in almost all areas, including security, economy, politics, and diplomacy. This impetus has contributed to the survival and prosperity of the ROK, which used to a fledgling and small country, and was a great help in creating the miracle that allowed Korea to dream of joining the ranks of advanced countries.

First of all, the biggest achievement of the ROK-U.S. alliance is that ROK's security environment has greatly improved. In particular, the presence of USFK has effectively deterred DPRK's reinvasion. After completing a post-war recovery in such a short period of time, DPRK has continued its aggressive and belligerent offensive against ROK since the mid-1960s. In particular, as can be seen in the Blue House Raid (January 21, 1968), the 1968 Pueblo Incident, and frequent dispatch of armed communist guerilla, DPRK may have been waiting for an opportunity to thwart ROK militarily and seek armed unification. At the time, DPRK constantly made the withdrawal of USFK its top priority in its strategy against ROK. However, the presence of USFK and the U.S.'s strong determination to defend ROK made DPRK unable to achieve its priority. If the ROK-U.S. alliance had not existed or had been feeble, there may have been the possibility of DPRK taking the conflict between China and the Soviet Union and the U.S.'s involvement in the Vietnam War as an opportunity to reinvade ROK.

The last 30 years, the latter half of the 70-year ROK-U.S. alliance, were a period of DPRK's nuclear weapons. DPRK's buildup in nuclear capabilities is not just targeting the U.S.: it is now publicly pushing for enhancing tactical nuclear development aimed at ROK. Practical responses to DPRK's threatening nuclear coercion include the steely determination by the U.S. to defend its ally and an extended deterrence. If the ROK-U.S. alliance weakens, doubts and anxiety over the extended deterrence by the U.S. will only grow and such situation will put ROK in a strategically tough spot, having to choose between nuclear armament and unconventional appeasement toward DPRK

as a substitute. In this case, the economic, diplomatic, and political losses we have to endure are likely to be immense.

Security achievement through the alliance is not limited to national defense. The presence of USFK and the robust ROK-U.S. alliance have helped ROK effectively manage its relations with powerful countries such as China and Japan in a stable manner. As the U.S. has maintained partnership with ROK and with Japan respectively for the past 70 years, there has been no military conflict between ROK and Japan. At every moment of political and diplomatic conflict between ROK and Japan. The strong ROK-U.S. alliance has positively affected both countries, encouraging them to exercise control and seek reconciliation.

In addition, the ROK-U.S. alliance and the U.S.-Japan alliance have become an environment in which strategic cooperation is sustainable as ROK and Japan respond to the common military threat of DPRK. The ROK-U.S. alliance has served as a crucial means of blocking China's heft over the Korean Peninsula as well as countering its diplomatic coercion against ROK. Despite the geographical proximity due to the stationing of US troops in Korea, there has been no direct and serious military threat from China for the past 70 years.

Another achievement of the ROK-U.S. alliance we cannot deny is its contribution to ROK's economic growth. Thanks to security assistance from the U.S., ROK has been able to focus its limited national resources on economic growth and national competitiveness for a long time. It is particularly worth mentioning the longstanding military and economic assistance from the U.S., which continued for a long time after the Korean War, played a significant role in establishing ROK's economic infrastructure in a short period of time. The U.S. opened its market to ROK and helped its economic development through financial and technical support so that ROK could integrate into the global economy and continue to pursue export-driven growth.

Security and economic development through the ROK-U.S. alliance has expanded into political impact and achievement. Public support for the bilateral partnership has led to public favor toward liberal democracy led by the U.S., having a profound impact on the establishment of national identity and vision of ROK. During the Cold War, ROK naturally became a member of the liberal democracy bloc through the alliance with the U.S. and this type of democracy firmly converged as a national identity and the core value of the Korean Constitution.

The security, economy, and political development has become important foundation for securing our superiority in system competition against DPRK. The presence of USFK during the Cold War not only disapproved DPRK's power of command over the situation at the time but helped create an environment where a relatively stable competition between ROK and DPRK was possible. Given the fact DPRK's military power was ahead of that of ROK for the first 20 years since the establishments of their respective independent governments, ROK was highly likely to face coercion from DPRK, which had been stubborn and persistent. Fortunately, under the aegis of robust security environment through the ROK-U.S. alliance, rapid economic growth in the 1970s led to the confident adoption of policy toward DPRK, which paved the way for ROK to gain an edge in system competition against DPRK since the mid-1980s.

### **Peacebuilding**

The most important macroscopic achievement in the 70-year history of the ROK-U.S. alliance is that it has created cold but de facto peace on the Korean Peninsula in the region. The ROK-U.S. alliance has been the guard of peace on the Korean Peninsula and in the Northeast Asia region for the past 70 years. It has also deterred DPRK from invading and engaging in military actions against ROK while laying the institutional foundation that provided the U.S.'s expanded deterrence against DPRK's nuclear development. In addition to deterring war on the Korean Peninsula, the ROK-US alliance actively contributed to stabilizing security in the Northeast Asia region.

In particular, the stationing of USFK, together with USFJ, has served as a stabilizer in the Northeast Asia region. Although a truly warm peace built by cooperation has not been formed since there have been security dilemmas between countries on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia and repeated military tensions driven by DPRK's constant provocations for the past 70 years, it is still fair to say "cold peace" was virtually established with the ROK-U.S. alliance continuing to suppress war on the Korean Peninsula.

This security achievements started to be made since the birth of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Although the Chinese army pulled out from DPRK after the Korean War, USFK decided to station in ROK to keep the promise of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Such

development greatly contributed to the establishment of a strategic environment that worked to the advantage of ROK and against DPRK in the early post-war period. In order to address environmental difficulties, DPRK has constantly tried to nullify the armistice regime and called for the withdrawal of USFK. Despite more than 400,000 violations by DPRK in various forms since the armistice agreement, it is the ROK-U.S. alliance that has made the temporary and incomplete armistice regime stable.

USFK is a symbol of the ROK-U.S. alliance. It is deterrent to DPRK's invasion, a stabilizer in the region, and laid the foundation for qualitative development of the ROK military. Through the close military cooperation system over the past 70 years, ROK has acquired the world's most powerful American weapons system and established advanced operational and training systems. It is particularly worth mentioning that the achievement of independent national defense, which was made through cooperation with the U.S. and its support since the 1970s, has been the main driver of placing ROK 6<sup>th</sup> in global military power and establishing itself as one of defense powerhouses in the world. ROK's military power enhancement has led to the increased military power of the ROK-U.S. alliance, positively contributing to the creation of the virtuous circle that improves security stability in the region.

### **Balance of Power between the Great Powers**

The achievements of the ROK-U.S. alliance are not limited to the national interests of ROK and the U.S. The bilateral partnership has driven the stability of security in Northeast Asia region for the past 70 years. When the over-stretching of imperialism swept the world in the mid-19th century, East Asia became an arena for powers to compete against each other. Over the past two centuries, Northeast Asia has been a fierce battlefield of conflict and competition between continental powers and sea powers, with the boundaries of the communist bloc and the liberal democratic bloc overlapped.

From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the past 100 years, Northeast Asia has been a region where life-and-death military conflicts between powerful countries took place over regional hegemony, including Opium War, Russo-Japanese War, Second Sino-Japanese War, Pacific War, and the Korean War. All six actors consisting of the Northeast Asia

region have engaged in wars. If Europe's flashpoint was the Balkan Peninsula, Asia's flashpoint was Northeast Asia.

No war has broken out in Northeast Asia for the past 70 years since the establishment of the ROK-U.S. alliance. In the region, the stationing of USFK in Korea and Japan, and the signing of a military alliance between the two countries and the U.S. have suppressed military expansion by powers and DPRK. The biggest reason behind the absence of war in Northeast Asia for the past 70 years is that the balance of power in the region has remained robust. No country in the region has swift and overwhelming capabilities to bring change to the balance of power, nor was any country bold enough to adopt such strategy. In the process of forming and operating this balance of power, the ROK-U.S. alliance, together with the U.S.-Japan alliance, can be assessed to have served as a facilitator and a supporter of the balance of power.

It is highly likely that the role of the ROK-U.S. alliance as a balancer will not change anytime soon. First of all, from the perspective of the U.S., which is engaged in fierce strategic competition with China, ROK's strategic value is far greater than it was as in the past. Given the presence of USFK on the Korean Peninsula and the status of ROK as a key partner for economic security with geopolitical value, the U.S. is poised to continue to strengthen its alliance with ROK to ensure a stable balance beyond the region.

Above all, from the U.S. perspective, which needs to maintain international nonproliferation regime, cooperating with ROK is absolutely necessary as it is in the process of pursuing the denuclearization of DPRK. The U.S. should firmly pursue the complete denuclearization of DPRK while effectively and continuously strengthen the extended deterrence to make sure ROK will not risk causing a fracture in the ROK-U.S. alliance and seek nuclear armament independently. All those needs and concerns are captured in the Washington Declaration announced by the leaders of ROK and the U.S. on April 26.

The increased nuclear threats by DPRK means a higher necessity of strengthening the extended deterrence by the U.S. and the cooperation through ROK-U.S. alliance. This will provide the U.S. with an opportunity to increase its influence in the region, a scenario both China and Russia will naturally watch out. However, if this happens, the U.S. will only improve its control over the situation by strengthening the ROK-U.S.

alliance, the U.S.-Japan alliance, and the ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral partnership, and will not accept any attempt to change the balance of power. As a result, it is likely that the role of the ROK-U.S. alliance as a balancer will be further strengthened.

#### 4. Conclusion

ROK today is completely different from what it was like 70 years ago. Over the period, there was a 150% increase in the population from 21 million and per-capita Gross National Income (GNI) increased from \$66 in 1953 to \$32,886 in 2022, which is a 500-fold increase. Our military power has elevated our viability to a historic level. The eyes of the world looking at us are full of surprises and they are envious of our accomplishments. Both in name and reality, ROK has joined the ranks of global pivotal state with its increased national power and national status. This means it will not be odd if ROK plays an active role in discussing current issues of importance. It is fair to say that in the 5000-year history of the Korean race, we have achieved the most resplendent achievement, and now we are preparing for a unified Korea with that accumulated power.

At the core of all these achievements lies in the 70 year-long ROK-U.S. alliance. I am confident that those achievements over 70 years made by sacrifices and future achievements for the defense of liberal democracy will become the most important asset, or eternal possession, at a moment when we achieve peaceful unification on the Korean Peninsula. However, the number one contributor that conceived the ROK-U.S. alliance and maintained and evolved it despite various crises was the efforts and determinations of our leaders and people. Therefore, we deserve a pat on the back and should be proud of ourselves. ©KINU 2023

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