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The US Foreign Policy and Agenda for ROK-US Cooperation

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US foreign policy under the Trump administration, whose objectives mainly lie in ‘America first’ principle, intends to sustain America’s predominance by being regionally selective in making a balance and redistributing the security burden among allies and partners. The problem, however, is that irrespective of America’s intention, outcomes resulting from Trumps’ foreign policy implementations are collectively heading in a neo-isolationist direction. This is because the Trump administration has approached foreign policy issues solely with an economy-oriented perspective so far, as exemplified by its retraction from a normalized diplomatic relationship with Cuba and withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement and the Paris Agreement. And this approach is no exception for the US alliance. President Trump’s foreign policy is evolving into a form of principled realism as a result of combining the two: 1) the goal of America first principle; and 2) President Trump’s determination to return to the US foreign relations before the Obama administration.

US Foreign Policy Foundation and ROK-US Relations

South Korea, too, is not free from this US foreign policy reversal toward realism. The priority of US policy on Northeast Asia is North Korea's nuclear issue. Although the US has other items on its agenda, such as the renegotiation over the distribution of costs for the United States Forces Korea (USFK) and the renegotiation of the KOR-US FTA, which had already led to a controversy during the 2016 US presidential election, South Korea and the US have rooms to focus on addressing the North Korean nuclear issue - a common priority for both countries. It is attributed to the projection that renegotiations on those issues are expected to take place after concluding renegotiations of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In fact, the Trump administration attempted to get China's cooperation in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue by temporarily halting the freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea. This indicates that the US views the North Korean nuclear issue as a top foreign policy priority and sees China's role as integral in addressing the North Korean nuclear issue.

The remaining question is that how much the ROK and the US share in their views of the value of the ROK-US alliance and their approach to maintaining stability in Northeast Asia. Given the fact that the North Korean nuclear issue is deeply nested in the Northeast Asian security environment, and that both countries have long maintained the view that the North Korean nuclear issue is to be resolved based on the ROK-US alliance, a discussion of this issue between the two states is indispensable. Yet it is difficult to predict how the US turn to realist foreign policy will be reflected in its approach to Northeast Asia and North Korea. In conclusion, the answer lies in how means and goals of realism-based foreign policy on North Korea and its phased approach would play out in conjunction with a regional strategy of Northeast Asia.

Multi-level Intentions of the US North Korean Policy

The principle of maximum pressure and engagement, which forms the foundation of President Trump's policy on North Korea, consists of not recognizing North Korea as a nuclear state, implementing every possible measures to sanction and pressure North Korea, not attempting a regime change, and ultimately resolving all the issue through dialogue. In other words, this strategy ultimately aims for inducing North Korea onto a path of denuclearization by imposing "maximum pressure" on the North and promoting "engagement" of the international community, including China, in pressuring North Korea.

In fact, this is not much different from the strategic patience of the Obama administration, except that a realistic approach is now required in interpreting the foundation of the Trump administration's North Korean policy. First of all, the US refusal to recognize North Korea as a nuclear power along with a promise of not attempting a regime change sends a message - the US aims for denuclearization in its North Korean policy but at the same time it will not allow justification for provocation on part of North Korea. Moreover, diplomatic and economic pressure on North Korea will continue given that it will make North Korea bear higher costs for nuclear development and that it will allow the continued international solidarity for denuclearization. And military pressure will also remain in place, not only through the deployment of THAAD - a conventional missile defense system - but also through non-conventional methods, such as building capacity of deterrence by denial - namely striking a cyber attack just before missile launches. With Russia and China against these military pressure, the US believes that this measure is necessary to protect the US from mid to long-range missile attacks by North Korea, and that it should stick with their plan even if it leads to China and Russia developing their own missile systems to counter the US military actions. In the meantime, in the context of the ROK-US alliance, the US will seek to maintain its military presence and readiness in South Korea to deter North Korea's provocations in the Korean Peninsula and to prevent Pyongyang's miscalculated action of using nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the US will continue to take measures to deter North Korea from provoking and escalating tension on the peninsula by exercising various flexible

deterrence options, including the deployment of strategic assets.

The US, which has emphasized China's role in addressing North Korean issue, has so far deployed a dual approach of focusing on the Chinese engagement and pressure on North Korea. While China will try to avoid any direct conflicts with the US on issues of the Korea Peninsula and adjust the level of response depending on the reactions of Russia, Japan, and South Korea, the US will increase the level of pressure on both China and North Korea in line with changes in the level of Chinese cooperation and in China-DPRK relations. This is indicative of President Trump's foreign policy aiming to realize peace through strength, and his determination not to stand idle while the perception of the power transition becomes widespread in the Asia-Pacific region.

In summary, various intentions are hidden in the foundations of US policy on North Korea - not only denuclearize North Korea but also manage the stability of the Korean Peninsula and maintain the balance of power in Northeast Asia.

Securing ROK Initiative in Inter-Korean Relations and ROK-US Cooperation

After the stirring controversy over the deployment of THAAD, Moon Jae-in administration appeared to attach more importance to the ROK-US cooperation for resolving North Korean issues. But Moon recently proposed restoring inter-Korean relations and resuming a dialogue based on agreement between South and North Korea. Now the main question is whether the South Korean government will be able to take the lead in advancing inter-Korean relations under the current situation on the Korean Peninsula and how much progress in inter-Korean relations can affect the denuclearization of North Korea. If this strategy can produce fruitful results and earn a positive reception from the US, it will lead to the international solidarity toward the denuclearization of North Korea and the strengthened credibility of the ROK-US cooperation. Furthermore, the role of South Korea in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue will be expanded. Lastly, it will also be an opportunity to strengthen



cooperation between Korea and the US, who signaled a turn towards a realism-based foreign policy. ©KINU 2017

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