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South Korean Public Opinion on the ROK-U.S. Defense-cost Sharing Negotiations

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Recently, media reports have come out one after another on the possible downsizing of the USFK. While the prevailing view is that it is to put pressure on the ROK-U.S. defense-cost sharing negotiations, one cannot completely rule out the possibility of either reduction or withdrawal of the USFK given the recent decision made by President Trump to withdraw U.S. forces from Germany. The KINU Unification Survey indicates that an absolute majority of South Koreans are against a rise in the defense-cost sharing of the USFK, an opinion which seems likely to stay for the time being given that this trend has continued since 2019. Such public pressure will play advantageous to the ROK government in narrowing the range of increase in the defense-cost sharing negotiations.

On July 17, The Wall Street Journal reported that the U.S. President Trump is considering a reduction in the number of United States Forces Korea (USFK). Ever since this report came out, some have raised the possibility that the U.S. might push forward the partial reduction in the number of U.S. troops stationed in the Republic of Korea (ROK) to put pressure on increasing Korea's share of defense spending. This paper seeks to analyze to what extent South Korean people perceive the level of ROK-U.S. defense cost-sharing to be proper, building on the results

of KINU Unification Survey, published annually by Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU). According to the KINU Unification Survey, over 96% of respondents believe that the ROK-U.S. defense-burden sharing should be either frozen at the current level or even lowered. Moreover, an absolute majority of the public is in support of the ROK government's proposal of a defense-cost increase at 13% as opposed to the U.S.'s proposal at 50%.

Background behind the Pressure on the Withdrawal of USFK

According to a report of The Wall Street Journal, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) presented options to President Trump on reducing the number of USFK last March.¹⁾ DOD accommodated the request of the White House, which made a request to the DOD that it report measures to either withdraw or reduce the number of U.S. troops not only from South Korea but also from Germany and Afghanistan. When President Trump made the decision to decrease the number of U.S. troops stationed in Germany, this sparked heated controversy over the possibility of the U.S. actually withdrawing U.S. forces or lowering the number of troops stationed in the ROK.

Thereafter, Mark T. Esper, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, denied the allegations of having ordered the withdrawal of the USFK, thereby leaving open a possibility of re-adjustment for U.S. forces stationed overseas, and stated "So we will continue to look at the adjustments, at every command we have in every theater, to make sure we are optimizing our forces."²⁾ John Bolton, the former National Security Advisor at the White House, whose recently published memoir on the revelation of

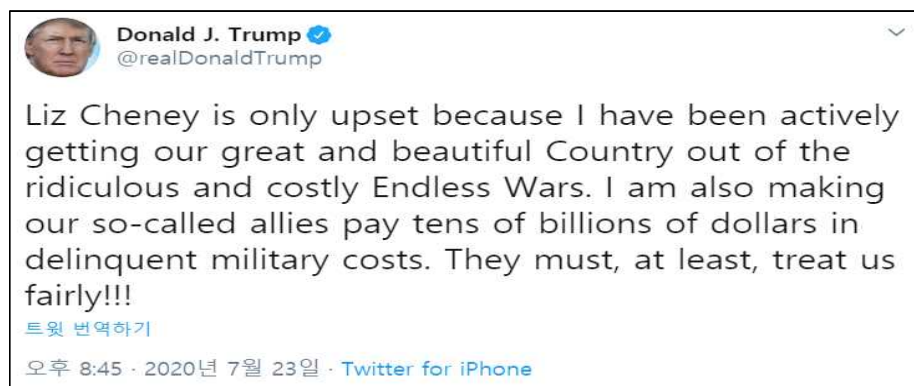
1) "Trump Administration Weighs Troop Cut in South Korea," *WSJ*, July 17, 2020, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-administration-weighs-troop-cut-in-south-korea-11595005050?mod=searchresults&page=2&pos=3>> (date accessed July 24, 2020).

2) "The DOD mentioning of the optimization of the U.S. forces in spite of a lack of order of withdrawal of the USFK," Yonhap News Agency, July 22, 2020, <<https://news.v.daum.net/v/20200722003752131>> (date accessed: July 24, 2020).

the U.S.–North Korea negotiation process stirred up controversy, said in a media interview that Trump, if re-elected, could possibly decrease the number of USFK in South Korea.³⁾

This is not the first time the possibility of the reduction of the number of US troops in South Korea came to the fore. President Trump, even before he won the election, mentioned on numerous occasions that countries like South Korea and Japan relied heavily on the U.S. for their defense despite their sufficient self-defense capability. Furthermore, he publicly made remarks that the U.S. forces dispatched overseas are a major factor behind the U.S.’s worsening fiscal spending as opposed to viewing their role from the perspective of international security.

<Picture 1> A Tweet of President Trump on July 23



President Trump’s July 23 tweet gives a good picture of his way of thinking (See <Picture 1>). He wrote this tweet castigating Representative Liz Cheney of the Republican Party for her opposition to the reduction of the number of troops stationed in Germany. Trump wrote that the U.S. allies owe a staggering tens of billions of dollars of military cost to the U.S. and that this kind of alliance is not fair to the U.S. The background behind the possible reduction of the number of U.S.

3) “John Bolton, ‘A likely scenario if Trump is reelected’ on a possible reduction of the size of the USFK,” *The Financial News*, July 23, 2020, <<https://news.v.daum.net/v/20200723164633979>> (date accessed: July 24, 2020).

forces stationed in South Korea lies more in Trump's necessity to rally his conservative supporters in leading up to the November presidential election rather than the U.S.'s need for a change in its East Asia strategy or for new security.

In fact, chances of the actual decrease in the size of the USFK are very slim. National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2021, which was passed in the U.S. Senate on July 23, stipulates that "the total number of members of the Armed Forces serving on active duty and deployed to the Republic of Korea" may not be reduced "to fewer than 28,500" and that a reduction requires the administration to provide Congress with legitimate reasons. While it is possible that Trump might push forward a reduction in spite of this legislative break, that is a highly unlikely scenario.

Overwhelmingly Opposing Public Opinion on the Increase of Defense-cost Sharing

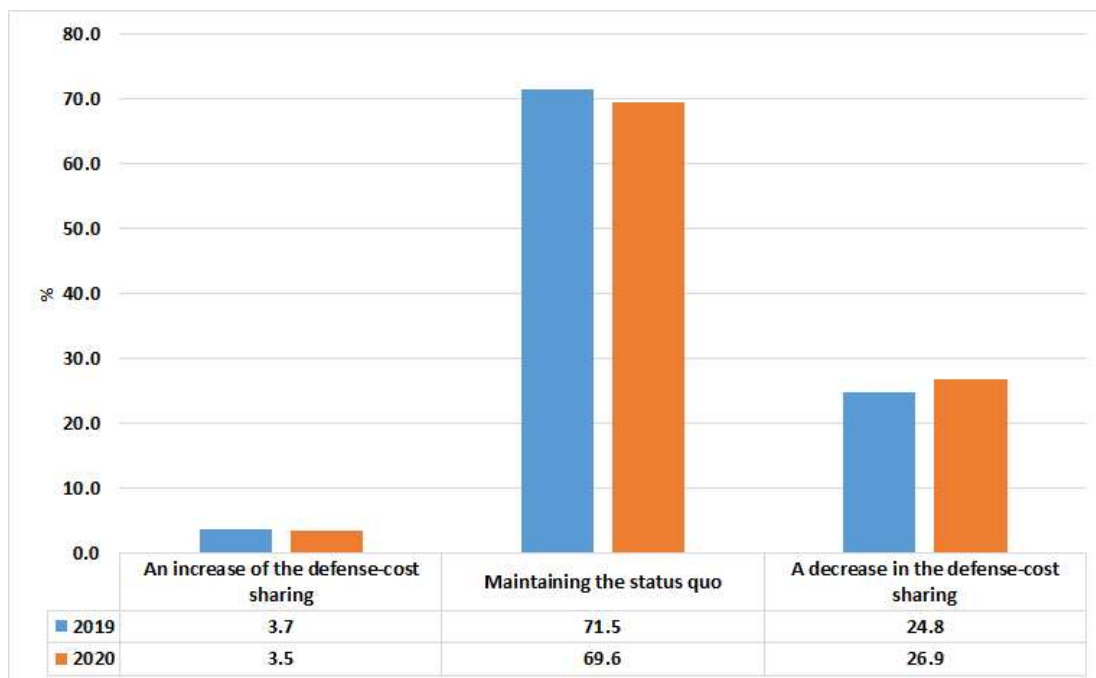
The controversy over reducing the number of USFK is closely related to on-going negotiations of defense-burden sharing initiated in 2019. The Trump administration demanded that the ROK government pay 5.9 trillion KRW, more than five times as high as the existing defense-cost sharing of 1.0389 trillion KRW (as of February, 2019).⁴⁾ Working-level officials of the ROK and U.S. have been engaged in negotiations on the increase of defense-burden sharing ever since, with barely no progress made so far. President Trump believes that the U.S. should provide military protection to the ROK, and that the defense-burden sharing should be increased in return. This view leads to the conclusion on the U.S. side that a reduction in the U.S. troops stationed in Korea is natural and legitimate if South Korea does not take up the cost to the U.S.'s satisfaction.

What does the South Korean public then think of issues of defense-cost

4) "The purpose of Bolton's visit is defense-cost, demanding six trillion KRW, far more than five times as high," *JoongAng Ilbo*, July 30, 2019, <<https://news.joins.com/article/23539069>> (date accessed: July 28, 2020).

sharing? The KINU Unification Survey was conducted two times in September 2019 and May 2020.⁵⁾ The respondents were asked about the ROK-U.S. defense-burden sharing, the result of which is presented in a graph at <Picture 2>.

<Picture 2> Opinions on the Defense-cost Sharing of the USFK



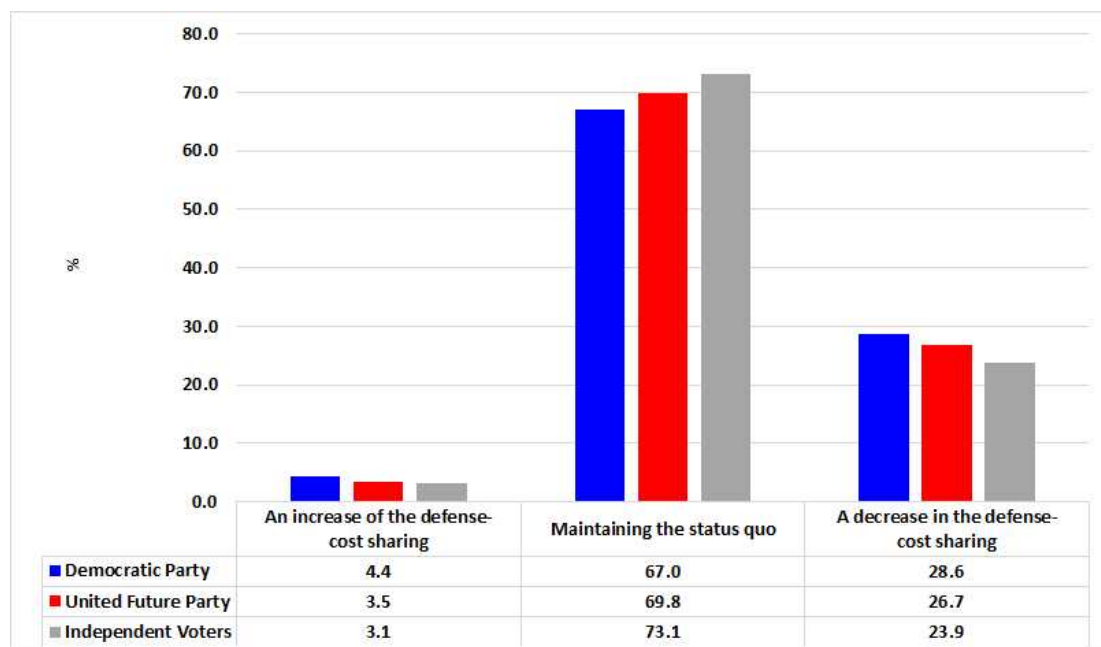
According to the 2019 survey, 96.3% (maintaining the status quo 71.5% + a reduction 24.8%) of respondents said that the defense-burden sharing should either be maintained at the current level or reduced. Only 3.7% was in support of an increase in the defense-cost sharing. The 2020 surveyed produced almost the same result with 96.5% in support of either maintenance or reduction and only 3.5% for an increase.

When compared by a political party that respondents support, almost no difference was found. As shown in a graph of <Picture 3>, 96.6% of supporters

5) The two surveys were targeted for 1,000 adult men and women nationwide. The 2020 survey was carried out between May 20 and June 10 and the 2019 survey between September 17 and October 8. Sampling errors for those two surveys were $\pm 3.1\%$ at the 95% confidence level.

of the United Future Party, which highly values the ROK-U.S. alliance and the USFK, are also for either maintaining the current level or reducing it, a number slightly higher than those of the Democratic Party (95.6%). Unaffiliated voters also showed a very similar tendency at 96.9%.

<Picture 3> Analysis of Public Opinion on the Defense-cost Sharing by Party Affiliation



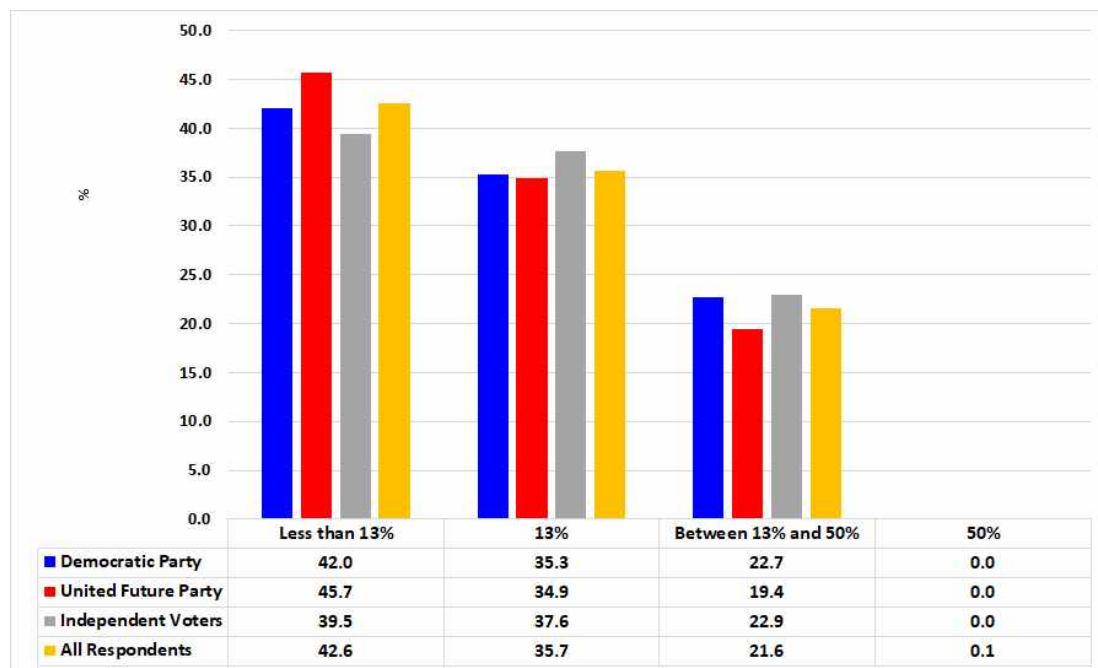
In other words, an absolute majority of South Koreans are against a rise in the defense-cost sharing of the USFK regardless of their party affiliation. It deserves our attention that this public opinion has not changed and is barely influenced by external factors, such as the freezing of inter-Korean relations or the COVID-19 situation. The fact that the result of the 2020 survey being identical to that of 2019 survey suggests that the initial result in 2019 was probably not a result of temporary concerns over the U.S.’s pressure on the increase of the defense-cost sharing. This result indicates that the direction of such public opinion is not likely to change over time.

Along with the questions stated above, the 2020 KINU Unification Survey contains new questions on the proper level of the increase of defense-cost sharing.

People were asked of their opinion on the ROK government’s proposal of a 13% increase from the current level and the U.S. administration’s proposal of 50% as the two sides have engaged in negotiations according to the media report.⁶⁾ Five choices were ① less than 13%, ② 13%, ③ between 13% and 50%, ④ 50%, ⑤ over 51%. Respondents were asked which range the increase of defense–burden sharing should be among those five choices.

Not a single person chose over a 51% increase while only one person chose a 50% increase. The highest percentage of respondents, 42.6%, chose a less than 13% increase while 35.7% agreed to the ROK government’s proposal of 13%. And 21.6% chose the compromised proposal of between 13% and 50%.

<Picture 4> Public Opinion on Increase of Defense–cost Sharing



A graph at <Picture 4> classified public opinion on the proper increase rate

6) “The U.S. viewed the compromised proposal to be ‘too low,’ demanding a ‘50% increase’ in defense–cost sharing…the ROK viewed [the increase exceeding their compromised proposal] ‘not meaningful,’” Yonhap News Agency, May 8, 2020, <<https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20200508057200504>> (date accessed: July 24, 2020).

of defense-burden sharing by affiliated political parties and presented them compared to the answers of all respondents. 45.7% of the supporters of the United Future Party chose less than a 13% increase, which marks the highest percentage, followed by slightly lower percentages of supporters for the Democratic Party at 42% and independent voters at 39.5%. The percentage of respondents that chose less than 13% increase or 13% was the highest among the United Future Party at 80.6%, followed by the Democratic Party at 77.3%, and independent voters at 77.1%. Although the supporters of the United Future Party prefer a lower increase rate of the defense-cost sharing, the difference among other party's supporters was not statistically meaningful. Considering that conservative parties greatly value the fiscal soundness with an emphasis on security, the attitude of supporters of the United Future Party toward the defense-burden sharing is understandable.

As such, the KINU Unification Survey illustrates that there has been a very dominant public consensus built on opposing the increase of defense-cost sharing. Neither has such a public opinion changed for the last nine months, nor has it been affected by the party affiliation. Against this backdrop, a room for concession possibly made by the Moon Jae-in administration is very narrow in its negotiation on the defense-cost sharing with the U.S. A radical increase, higher than the public expectation, would seriously backfire not only from opposition parties but also from supporters of the ruling party and independent voters. ©KINU 2020

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).