



Online Series

2017. 02. 08. | CO 17-04

Prospects for US-Russia Relations in the Trump Era and Implications on the Korean Peninsula

Hyun Seungsoo

(Research Fellow, International and Strategic Studies Division)

Russia had been at the center of the attention on the US presidential trial even before the Trump administration took office. Trump blatantly expressed his favor toward Russia and President Putin, including revering Putin as a respected leader, claiming for the acceptance of the Russia's annexation of Crimea, and arguing for the need to promote a cooperation with Russia to wage a war against IS. Major players in politics – including President Putin – and related industries in Russia also implicitly endorsed then presidential candidate Trump and laid out promising prospects that the US-Russia relations will be improved upon Trump winning the presidency. Putin did not even counter-react to the Obama administration when it deported all the Russian diplomats from the US as a retaliatory measure for the Russian intervention in the US presidential election. That itself is a sheer evidence that the Russian government holds high expectations for the Trump administration. In Russia, an analysis done by some experts comes out that Trump winning the presidency is tantamount to Putin earning the victory.

At this juncture, it is worth pondering a question of why Russia so longs



to see Trump taking oath of the office. First, it has to do with the immediate need to lift sanctions of the West imposed on Russia. Second, it is related to the international security cooperation. In particular, cooperation between the US and Russia is essential in waging a war on terror in the Middle East. There are also the remaining urgent tasks that would never be resolved without the US-Russia negotiation – NATO's ambition to go east toward the Russian borders, and the US-NATO's pursuit of installment of the US missile defense system in Europe. Third, pro-Russian figures, thanks to their dominance at the top posts in the Trump administration, could play a positive role in helping Putin advance his international strategy. Trump's pick for the secretary of state, Rex W.Tillerson, a former CEO of the largest oil company, Exxon Mobil, and the one for National Security Advisor, Michael T.Flynn, former Defense Intelligence Agency(DIA) officer, all have had close connections to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

However, the Russian elites have had both expectations and doubts for the rosy future prospects between Washington and Moscow especially after Trump was sworn in. As Trump's major appointees in the foreign policy and security position laid out the direction that runs counter to the pro-Russian statements or even policy much emphasized by him on the campaign trail, now the Russian press is left wondering if a new era marked by the US-Russia's secret and cozy relationship could arrive. In particular, since the ideas of extending NATO's influence eastward and deploying the missile defense system in Europe - the most sensitive issue for Russia - had been decided long before the US presidential election took place, experts on Russia estimate that those decisions are highly unlikely to be upended, regardless of how different Trump's ideas are from those of Obama. Therefore, the dominant view maintains that confrontational phase will continue for the time being on issues that pose a threat to Russia's security, although cooperation between the US and Russia could be partially expanded depending on matters in question.

However, if the US-Russia relations are marked more by cooperation than expected



under the Trump administration, how big of an impact will they have on North East Asia and the Korean Peninsula? Russia has largely focused on the economy, more than security in East Asia, unlike the Middle East and Europe where a massive amount of security issues abound that need to be resolved in relations with America. As the strategic cooperation between Beijing and Moscow has been strengthened to contain the US hegemony, Russia is now moving in line with China on security issues in Northeast Asia. Although some view Trump's appeasement approach toward Russia as a way to keep a check on China, Russia seems highly unlikely to choose cooperation with America at the expense of its relations with China. The Kremlin and the People's Republic of China (PRC) share the same view that the US's attempt to establish an unipolar order and pursue a hegemony-seeking policy should be stopped in the Eurasian continent, including Northeast Asia, and they have strengthened their cooperative relations to make that happen. Therefore, should America under the Trump administration less intervene in Asia, it would be music to Putin's ears and would also help the Putin's international strategy in building a multi-polar international order. On the contrary, if the US causes conflicts with China over issues in South China Sea or North Korea nuclear pursuit, or blatantly advances its intervention strategy in Asia, Russia will not unilaterally take America's side. The feasible scenario is that Russia could come forward to serve as a bridging role in mediating the US-China conflicts. But whether it can be done successfully remains uncertain at the moment.

In the meantime, Russia's New Eastern Policy – a strategy for economic development in Northeast Asia – could also get the momentum going once the US–Russia relations are improved. In fact, the US influence has come into play as one of the stumbling blocks in advancing the Far East development to the level that Putin has aimed for. The international sanctions make it difficult for not only Korea and Japan but also Russia-friendly China to freely have deals with Russia. However, once the US influence wanes, it will make it much easier for Japan to pass on the technology to Russia and for Chinese financial institutions to provide funds to Russia.

Under such circumstance, Korea will have much larger room for the Far East development. The framework for multilateral cooperation connecting the regional economies could be established in the Northeast Asian region - a region marred by security dilemma or trilemma over North Korea's nuclear issues and history and territorial disputes. Such situation will unfold as a positive factor for Russia's Far East development.

Korea–Russia relations tend to go hand-in-hand with the US–Russia relations – a result of the international power dynamics, regardless of Korea's choice or will. If the US–Russia relations show a sign of improvement, getting out of the worst situation and into the cooperative phase, such scenario will play out in our favor. Should the US under the Trump leadership trigger conflicts with China creating the confrontational phase, Russia could step forward to serve a mediating role in addressing the North's nuclear issues. Although political and economic strategic leverage that Russia can utilize over North Korea is not as big as that of China, Moscow will be willing to assume the role as a peacemaker on the Korean Peninsula – something that China has failed to do. Once the condition becomes rife, Russia could demand South Korea to restart the tri-lateral economic cooperation of South Korea–North Korea–Russia, including Rajin–Khasan project that was put to a halt due to Seoul's sanctions on North Korea. However, the Kremlin is not likely to sit by the collapse of the North Korean regime. Therefore, the ROK government's policy on North Korea and unification should be adjusted and enacted accordingly, reflecting all those factors stated above.

The countless variables and uncertainty are expected to emerge under the Trump administration. And the ROK should put forth sophisticated and bold efforts to turn them into an opportunity of guaranteeing our survival and achieving unification, which requires us to think outside the box. Under any circumstances, Russia should remain as a friendly and positive neighbor to the unified Korea. And making that happen also requires the efforts on the part of South Korea. ©KINU 2016

※ 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).