



The U.S.-China-Russia Trilateral Relations in the Trump Era and Foreign Strategies of the ROK

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Abstract

The Trump administration has declared America-first policy as the basic foreign policy stance of the U.S., and has pursued Indo-Pacific strategy that keeps China and Russia in check and encloses them as a part of larger framework of its external strategy. It signifies that the U.S. chose pursuing its own national interest rather than fulfilling its responsibility to provide public goods to the international community as an exemplary superpower in leading the global order. The U.S. has imposed sanctions on Russia since the Ukraine crisis in 2014, and is believed to be waging a hegemonic war against China, which started with pressuring political and economic institutional shift within China through trade conflicts and tariff imposes, and now extended to trade and economic wars, arms competitions, and security and ideological confrontations.

In response, China is pushing a strategy of “winning without a fight (不戰勝)” in its competition with the U.S. and attempting to secure its leverage in areas near the Chinese territory as a fait accompli by properly adjusting the level of tensions and provocations, since it is hardly possible for China to win against the U.S. in a direct military confrontation. China is also conducting an annual joint drill with Russia and is preparing military cooperation almost equivalent to the level of alliance. In particular, the cooperation between Russia and China is reciprocal and complementary,

hence, this cooperation will continue to be maintained and strengthened as long as hardline stances of the U.S. against China and Russia continue. In the economic aspect, China is seeking a compromise by taking President Trump's political interests account and seeking to boost the domestic market and technological self-reliance, rather than going all-out against the U.S. Nevertheless, the confrontation between the G2 will structurally persist as China pursues its power almost equivalent to that of the U.S., and as President Trump and President Xi continue to politically exploit the conflict between the two states. And yet, it is highly unlikely that this conflict will end as a total destruction in a short- and mid-term period. Of course, however, the U.S.-China competition is highly likely to continue in a mid- to long-term period as the competition is in fact about the future world hegemonic power.

However, if the current trend continues, China will overtake the U.S. in terms of market size and economic power (GDP) before 2030; the ratio of aircraft carriers will be reduced from 11:3 to 11:6 within a decade; there is a possibility that China will surpass the U.S. in military power by 2050. In terms of energy and food, China is also overcoming its inferiority by enhancing cooperation with Russia and focusing on increasing food production including smart farming. In the end, the success or the failure of the hegemonic competition will be determined by technology, finance, and the capability to establish an attractive model of global governance.

The main pillar of the U.S. foreign strategy consists of not only bilateral policies against China and Russia but also the ROK-U.S. alliance to inflict an effective pressure against the two countries. However, it is becoming a serious challenge to South Korea's national strategy as South Korea intends to maintain and develop strategic partnerships and cooperative relationships with China and Russia. In particular, as the competition between the U.S. and China is gradually expanding to a full-scale confrontation, the U.S. is stepping pressure on its allies including the ROK, to take a side with the U.S. in the U.S.-China relations. However, it is time for the states to go beyond the traditional ideological logic that defines the current situation as the Cold War ideological confrontation and step away from demanding states to choose one over the other. The ROK government should respond with diplomatic principles and norms suitable for the spirit of the 21st century, which values competition based on rules and inclusive international order and norms and which both the U.S. and China abide by despite their sharp conflicts. For instance, the ROK government should declare its foreign strategy principle as "all-out cooperation for global peace and common prosperity" and respond to requests of the U.S. actively only when it is in line with the principle.

Meanwhile, as the U.S. and China rush toward a new, all-out Cold War confrontation, the structural shift undermines China's motivation to cooperate with the U.S. in imposing sanctions against the DPRK. And now, strategic cooperation with the DPRK has become more critical for China. In order to solve North Korea's nuclear issue, it is essential for the two powers to control their conflicts to a certain extent within the rules made by the international community and share the necessity to cooperate under specific circumstances despite the ongoing competition. Therefore, the ROK government should work together with Russia to reduce conflict factors, and promote communication and mediation so that the U.S.-China relationship can be rebuilt into a cooperative relationship. South Korea's role in mediating and promoting negotiations for North Korea's denuclearization is to balance strategic interests of neighboring countries, which are guaranteeing the security of the North's regime. To this end, diplomatic wisdom to persuade stakeholders into the establishment of peace regime on the Korean Peninsula and the institutionalization of multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia is demanded.

In regards to South Korea's policy towards the North, appropriate measures to improve inter-Korean relationship should be preceded, such as the suspension of sending propaganda leaflets to the DPRK. And if South Korea claims that it was difficult to properly implement the inter-Korean agreement due to the prior coordination with the U.S. on all related issues, then the ROK government should now change the way of communication with the U.S. by first implementing measures that the ROK can duly do and then informing the U.S. after all changes are made.

In terms of foreign policy towards the U.S., the delayed ROK-U.S. defense cost negotiations should be swiftly but properly concluded. If the U.S. continues to insist that South Korea must pay the cost of its military presence, the solution could be formed in a way to reduce the burden of the U.S. defense force. The ROK government could suggest the U.S. to reduce the number of troops in the South by about 10,000 from the current 28,500 troops, which are excessively deployed considering South Korea's improved defense capability, to adjust the current ROK-U.S. relations into a reciprocal one. As for the DPRK nuclear issue, the approach of the U.S. to make one time deal for a complete denuclearization has little chance of reaching an agreement due to their weak mutual trust and such a difference in state's power between North Korea and the U.S. The U.S. is nearly 100 times greater than the DPRK in terms of nuclear power, means of transportation and economic power. Nonetheless, it is hardly possible for the U.S. to inflict immense pressure against the DPRK to the extent fatal to the North's survival, such as a complete defeat in a war or a total destruction of economy. If the U.S. truly desires North Korea's denuclearization, it should then be more active in

convincing the North to take incremental, phased, simultaneous, and reciprocal actions.

China is South Korea's number one trading and investment partner and plays a crucial role in resolving the DPRK issue, maintaining peace and realizing peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, it is wise for the ROK government to promote the development of relations and reciprocal cooperation with China, and at the same time, to simultaneously push low-level hedging in parallel in preparation for China's rise as a superpower.

Furthermore, the South Korean government should continue its effort towards Russia to engage with the North, while it actively pursues various reciprocal economic cooperation projects with Russia. In particular, it is deemed necessary for President Moon Jae-in to attend Eastern Economic Forum, which is held in Vladivostok every autumn. ❖

※ Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.

※ This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.