



Series: America's Choice in 2020

④ The ROK-U.S. Relations

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The U.S. citizens have chosen Democratic Party candidate Joseph R. Biden as the 46th President. The international community, which had expressed concerns over the Trump administration's isolationism and protectionism, is now paying keen attention to the Biden administration's foreign and security policies to be launched in January 2021. South Korea is no exception. Unless the threat from North Korea disappears, the ROK-U.S. alliance should be maintained and strengthened.

President Moon Jae-in continued to highlight the importance of the ROK-U.S. alliance, but cracks in the scene appeared during the defense cost-sharing negotiations and the DPRK policy coordination. In addition, the U.S. is asking South Korea to join the pressure against China (participation in the U.S. operations for freedom of navigation, exclusion of China's Huawei, human rights issues, and the Hong Kong Security Law issues), but Seoul has maintained its principled stance. Nevertheless, Biden stressed in his column to the media that the ROK-U.S. alliance is a blood alliance, and made it clear that he will not extort his ally and will not use a withdrawal of the U.S. troops in ROK as a threat card. Therefore, it is expected that there will be no major friction between the U.S. and South Korea regarding the defense cost-sharing and the reduction of size of the U.S. troops.

Regardless of changes in administration, however, the U.S. will uphold its global strategic objective of "maintaining and strengthening the hegemonic power" and its national interests of "preserving the stability and prosperity of the U.S. and protecting its values." And as the U.S. hegemony is being challenged by China and its economy continues to decline, it is unlikely that the incoming U.S. government's foreign policy will be established in the direction of South Korea's benefits.

Biden declared the end of “America First” policy and stressed the recovery of the U.S. global leadership. The first step toward restoring the U.S. leadership is rebuilding the damaged relations with its allies. Biden recognizes, “The alliance is an irreplaceable cornerstone of the U.S. security and provides strategic interests.” Still, he argues that the allies should improve their own defense capabilities, take more responsibility for regional security and bear a fair share of the defense costs. Furthermore, he stresses that he will share threats and take joint actions with allies in the Asia-Pacific region, including the ROK, Japan and Australia.

Therefore, while some cracks in the ROK-U.S. relations will be sealed through the reconstruction of the alliance, the Biden administration, which also claims sharing of responsibility and cost, is expected to demand a certain level of increase to upkeep defense costs. However, such demand from the U.S. is expected to be determined at a reasonable level. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party stressed that the reasonable size of U.S. troops stationed abroad is a prerequisite for securing a comparative advantage for the U.S. military. Therefore, Biden is expected to begin redeployment of the U.S. troops overseas after reviewing the level of risks by region and the status of U.S. troops stationed abroad. As the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) will not be excluded from the review, the possibility of adjusting the USFK cannot be ruled out. However, the ROK-U.S. joint military drills will be strengthened to enhance readiness for upcoming changes.

At the same time, the strengthening of alliance will also consolidate international cooperation between the two countries, which is expected to call for South Korea’s participation in the U.S.-led pressure on China. In other words, the U.S., which is feeling a crisis over China’s rise, will continue its policy of pressuring China, and will call Seoul to join the actions against Beijing, emphasizing the duty of ally. Furthermore, the Biden administration will also ask for better relations between the ROK and Japan to strengthen security cooperation between Seoul, Washington and Tokyo.

Above all, the problem is the coordination of the DPRK policy between Seoul and Washington. The goal of the upcoming Biden administration’s North Korea policy remains a “complete denuclearization of the DPRK” and highlights continued and coordinated diplomatic activities with allies in the process of denuclearizing the North. In particular, especially through his article in *Foreign Policy*, Biden is attempting to entice practical actions for North Korea’s denuclearization by “empowering the denuclearization negotiation team and promoting consistent and coordinated campaigns with allies and China for the common goal of denuclearizing DPRK.” Biden’s foreign and security policy advisory team stressed that North Korea should take sincere and verifiable steps to denuclearize, before easing sanctions and possibly declaring an end to the war. In addition, the Biden administration showed a great interest in North

Korea's human rights issues, suggesting that it would use them as a pressure card for the North. Biden described Kim Jong Un as a "thug," but at the same time, said he is willing to meet Kim if North Korea agrees to denuclearize, leaving a room for the next summit.

As a result, there is a possibility of the Moon Jae-in government to clash with the Biden administration as President Moon pursues the Korean Peninsula Peace Process in the principles of engagement, lifting of sanctions and the declaration of the end of war, while Biden is likely to highlight human rights agendas and tangible results (efforts) of the North's denuclearization. Accordingly, progress in inter-Korean relations seems to be difficult to speed up.

However, it is expected to take at least six months for Biden to exercise a transition team to review the Trump administration's foreign policy and establish a diplomatic and security line to deal with the Korean Peninsula issues. Hence, the U.S. policy on DPRK will be outlined around April 2021. Therefore, the South Korean diplomatic authorities should step up policy coordination with Washington by strengthening exchanges among foreign and security policy officials of the incoming government over the next six months.

In the process, the ROK government should keep in mind that the state power of the U.S. is not the same as it was in the past, and that the U.S. is being greatly challenged by rising China. In the 1950s, the GDP of the U.S. constituted more than 50 percent of the world's GDP, but now it is less than 25 percent. With China, which accounts for 16 percent of the world's GDP and has a population of 1.5 billion, more strongly challenging than ever, the U.S. is no longer a "benevolent hegemon" that bears all responsibilities and costs. However, this does not mean that the U.S. is a "malign hegemon" that pressures and damages other countries for its own national interests. It signifies that the U.S. is now an ordinary hegemon or simply another global power as it reaps the generosity it had provided in the past. Therefore, the ROK government should refrain from anticipating too much in the process of policy coordination with the U.S. Rather it needs to put emphasis on the fact that the ROK-U.S. relations will develop into a more equal relationship.

Finally, on November 8, President Moon delivered a message to President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris on social media, congratulating them on their victory and that South Korea is "looking forward to working together for common values." I hope Moon's expectations of Biden turn into a reality. ♣

※ 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.