



Is the ROK-U.S. Alliance Still Alive?: Assessment of the 52th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting

Dr. LEE Sang Hyun
*Senior Research Fellow,
The Sejong Institute
(shlee@sejong.org)*

The 52nd ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) was held in Washington, D.C., on October 14, 2020. Some assess that the ROK-U.S. alliance is almost broken over this meeting. Is that the case? Did the SCM expose an insurmountable impasse between South Korea and the U.S.? Or did simple disagreements arise during a normal consultation process? The fact that a joint press conference conventionally held between the two defense ministers after the SCM got canceled raises doubt about the current address of the ROK-U.S. alliance.

The joint communique of this SCM does not radically differ from those of the past, yet few points should be compared to last year's.

First, the joint communique does not mention that the U.S. Force in South Korea will maintain its current force level. During the Obama administration, South Korea and the U.S. had agreed to keep 28,500 U.S. troops in South Korea. For the first time in 12 years, the phrase that stipulates a certain force level of the U.S. Force will be maintained in South Korea has disappeared from the joint communique. Some infer that the Trump administration intentionally left out such a phrase in order to pressure South Korea and negotiate over defense cost-sharing. The South Korean government reported that there was no discussion on the reduction of U.S. troops in South Korea. However, the U.S. indicated that the redeployment of U.S. troops worldwide is always reviewed.

Second, sharing defense costs was on the agenda. While South Korea sides with the idea of sharing defense costs at a level that is mutually acceptable, the U.S. sides with the idea of sharing the cost—of joint defense—in a more equitable way. The U.S. Secretary of Defense Esper pressed South Korea to fairly contribute to joint defense, instead of imposing the burden on the U.S. taxpayers.

Third, concerns over wartime operational control were raised. South Korea expressed that it will prepare conditions for a transfer of wartime operational control and create a joint defense system led by the South Korean military. However, the U.S. indicated that South Korea has not yet sufficiently satisfied such conditions for the transfer now. South Korea and the U.S. had agreed in 2014 to consider three conditions for the transfer of wartime operational control: the South Korean military's capability to lead combined operations, South Korea's initial reaction capability to North Korea's nuclear weapons, and the security environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula. Six years later, however, South Korea is even farther away from meeting those three conditions. North Korea's recent military parade marking the 75th anniversary of the foundation of the Worker's Party of Korea featured mega-sized inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM), submarine launched ballistic missile (SLBM), and other conventional weapons threatening South Korea's security. While North Korea has strengthened its military from day to day, South Korea has even suspended joint drills with the U.S. for more than three years in order to induce North Korea to negotiate for denuclearization. Even the commander of U.S. Forces Korea expressed concerns about the lack of training. To make matters worse, the COVID-19 crisis has hampered the verification process for the transfer of wartime operational control. Under these circumstances, South Korea's intention to set a short deadline for the transfer of wartime operational control and to push ahead with it could jeopardize both the U.S. and the South Korean military forces.

There are also other issues that may be interpreted as points of disagreement between the U.S. and South Korea. One example is the Trump administration's push for an anti-China economic alliance, including sanctions against Huawei and an establishment of the Economic Prosperity Network (EPN). The Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment, Keith Krach, who visited South Korea for the ROK-U.S. Senior Economic Dialogue (SED), advised South Korea to join the Clean Network for South Korea's national security. The Clean Network is the U.S. proposal to establish trusted 5G network, mobile applications, cloud-based systems, and undersea cable without untrusted vendors such as Huawei and ZTE from China. The South Korean government, however, indicated that it is up to each company to decide on the matter.

Also, the U.S. Department of Defense invited South Korea to participate in Quad Plus, an expansion of Quad to develop an Asian version of NATO against China. However, the South Korean government did not positively respond as it is rather considering relations with China for trade and others. Kang Kyung-wha, the Foreign Minister of South Korea, even publicly expressed that participating in the Quad Plus is not a good idea. Nonetheless, as the joint communique mentions the promotion of security cooperation among South Korea, the U.S. and Japan, and reaffirms the

importance of complying with international order and norms, especially in terms of freedom of navigation and flight, the South Korean government should clear up its position to have an organized voice.

The end-of-war declaration is another issue that shows differences between the U.S. and South Korea. South Korean President Moon Jae-in constantly emphasized the ending of the war during his speeches at the United Nations General Assembly and the Korea Society and showed his will to restart the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. In the meantime, Suh Hoon, South Korea's director of the National Security Office, met Mike Pompeo, the U.S. Secretary of State, in Washington, and indicated that the end-of-war declaration and denuclearization cannot be separated. He said that it is only a matter of the chronological order of the incident and of the degree of integration between the two. Experts in the U.S. generally view the end-of-war declaration as a part of the negotiation process; the declaration remains within the bigger framework of denuclearization and is a symbolic device of trust-building during the process of denuclearization. While the South Korean government believes that the end-of-war declaration will lead to denuclearization at the end, it is also possible that North Korea could simply receive the end-of-war declaration as a gift and not necessarily denuclearize. In other words, the end-of-war declaration and denuclearization can only be processed simultaneously along with North Korea's actions to build trust.

The positions of South Korea and the U.S. differ in many of the above-mentioned matters. It is quite natural to see such differences as the U.S. and South Korea have different national interests, strategic environment, and policy directions. What matters is how the two nations handle and respond to such differences.

First, both sides need to pay attention to false signals and manage noises to maintain the alliance. The Trump administration's high-handed messages to South Korea and other allies, ahead of the presidential election, undermine the alliance. Lee Soo-hyuck, the current South Korean ambassador to the U.S., said that "just because Korea chose the U.S. 70 years ago does not mean it has to choose the U.S. for the next 70 years, too" and that "(South) Korea can choose to keep siding with the U.S. only if it is able to love the country and if it serves the nation's interests." The current Minister of Unification of South Korea, Lee In-young, described the ROK-U.S. alliance as the "Cold War alliance," and Song Young-gil, the current chairman of the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee, described the United Nations Forces "an illegitimate force with no roots whatsoever." They are all careless remarks that lacked the weight of public services.

Second, it is critically important to strategically communicate for South Korea and the U.S. now as the international situations and the surroundings of the Korean Peninsula are engendering a lot of uncertainties. Few problems cannot destroy the ROK-U.S. alliance, which has lasted 70 years, overnight. However, as a little leak will

sink a great ship, the possibility of breaking the ROK-U.S. alliance increases if the disagreements accumulate without settlements. Is the South Korean government responding appropriately to recent disagreements between the U.S.? It must think forward and actively manage the ROK-U.S. alliance before the alliance reaches an irreversible red line. ❖

※ *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.*