

Session: ROK-U.S. Alliance

Date/Time: April 24, 2018 / 13:00-14:30

Rapporteur:

Lisa Collins, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Moderator:

Choi Kang, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Speakers:

Bruce W. Bennett, RAND Corporation

Victor Cha, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Kim Sung-han, Korea University

Daniel R. Russel, Asia Society Policy Institute

Soeya Yoshihide, Keio University

Session Sketch:

Panelists in Session 1: ROK-U.S. Alliance discussed the meaning of the ROK-U.S. alliance in a changing global and regional environment. The panelists generally agreed that, despite initial expectations last year that there might be some friction between the Moon Jae-in government and the Trump administration, the two allies have maintained extensive cooperation on security and trade issues and have remained in close coordination over North Korea policy in advance of the upcoming summits.

The panelists noted a number of challenges, however, that could strain the alliance in the future if not handled carefully. Among the

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issues that could present problems going forward were potential divisions on North Korea policy and disagreements over the cost of stationing U.S. military troops on the Korean peninsula. In particular, panelists Victor Cha and Daniel Russel were concerned about the possibility of emerging daylight between Seoul and Washington if North Korea exploited differences between the U.S. and South Korea. They expressed concern that North Korea would seek to decouple the alliance in the process of denuclearization talks during the inter-Korean summit and the U.S.-DPRK summit. Kim Sung-han and Bruce Bennett argued that challenges could also arise if President Trump decides to take a strictly transactional approach towards the ROK-U.S. alliance and the issue of burden sharing in negotiations for the Special Measures Agreement later this year. Given the importance of the ROK-U.S. alliance and the U.S.-Japan alliance to regional security, Soeya Yoshihide asserted that it was necessary to improve relations between South Korea and Japan. Greater ROK-Japan bilateral cooperation would benefit not only those two countries, but would further strengthen the trilateral initiatives that form the backbone of the U.S. alliance system in Northeast Asia.

The panelists agreed that the upcoming summits with North Korea would provide an important measuring stick for future alliance coordination. While all agreed that a peaceful outcome was desirable, each of the panelists cautioned against creating overly inflated expectations for the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and/or the conclusion of a peace agreement with the DPRK. “Peace breaking out” on the Korean peninsula would be a positive development in theory but could potentially bring about additional challenges for the ROK-U.S. alliance and would likely necessitate

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careful management to avoid unpredictable outcomes for other U.S. alliance relationships in Asia.

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