



Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2019: “Korea’s Choice”
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Session: ROK-U.S. Alliance

Date/Time: April 23, 2019 / 13:00-14:30

Rapporteur:

Troy Stangarone, Korea Economic Institute of America

Moderator:

Sue Mi Terry, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Speakers:

Kim Sung-han, Korea University

Marc Knapper, U.S. Department of State

Sydney A. Seiler, U.S. Forces Korea

Soeya Yoshihide, Keio University

Zhu Feng, Nanjing University

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At a time when the ROK-U.S. alliance has seen the KORUS FTA renegotiated and a significant shift in the approach to handling North Korea, the Session 1 panel on the ROK-U.S. Alliance explored the current state of the alliance as it faces potential divergence on approaches to North Korea and South Korea finds itself possibly caught between great power between China and its ally the United States.

North Korea is the number one issue in the alliance from Kim Sung-han’s perspective. In the aftermath of the no-deal summit in Hanoi, he noted that U.S. President Donald Trump remains committed to reaching a “big deal” that would include a road map to the complete verified dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear programs. Trump realizes that sanctions have been working, but with the release of the Mueller report he may decide to focus on domestic issues that would aid his reelection rather than focus on international issues like North Korea.

If the United States remains committed to a “big deal,” Kim Jong-un has continued to insist on a phased approach to denuclearization, as well as maintaining the top-down negotiating strategy. Despite the failure of its strategy in Hanoi, Pyongyang is likely to continue with it. It will also continue to miniaturize its nuclear weapons until it is able to trade Yongbyon for sanctions relief, delay on providing a declaration, and will likely insist on some type of partial removal of U.S. troops from South Korea in exchange for the partial dismantlement of its programs. In light of the result in Hanoi, Moon needs to convince Kim to move towards more of a staged approach, but he needs to avoid becoming a mediator between the United States and North Korea.

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The ideal solution according to Kim would be for the United States and North Korea to agree to a staged approach where 75 percent of the dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs are in the first stage to ensure dismantlement is irreversible, while issues such as a peace regime should wait until the second stage.

On the potential for South Korea to cooperate with the United States Indo-Pacific strategy, Kim noted that Japan is working with China on its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and that the broader Indo-Pacific strategy is likely compatible with the BRI. He also noted that South Korea should not have any opposition to the broader principals of the Indo-Pacific strategy, such as freedom of navigation, but that it may be challenged to take part due to its focus on relations with North Korea and China.

While acknowledging the important role that the security relationship has played in the alliance, Marc Knapper said that it would not be giving the alliance its due to not acknowledge the other ways that the United States and South Korea cooperate. However, before talking about economic cooperation, Knapper pushed back on the narrative that there is a growing division between the United States and South Korea on North Korea. He noted that shortly after Hanoi, there were meetings at the senior leadership levels of defense ministers, foreign ministers, and between the two presidents, as well as almost daily coordination on the working levels.

In recent years, Knapper noted that the two countries have made a conscious choice to “take the alliance to the next level.” In this sense, economic security has played a significant role for both countries in developing the alliance. The KORUS FTA, along with its revisions, have helped to tie the two economies closer together, while the United States is South Korea’s top source of FDI and South Korea is a significant source of FDI in the United States. The two countries have also worked together on energy security with South Korea becoming the top importer of U.S. LNG and a significant importer of U.S. petroleum. The increased imports of U.S. fossil fuels have also helped to reduce South Korea’s trade surplus with the United States by 60 percent. Knapper likewise noted that as two major industrial economies the United States and South Korea were well placed to work together to help develop global standards for the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and that there are significant opportunities for overlap between the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy and South Korea’s New Southern Policy.

Sydney Seiler also pushed back on the idea that there is separation between the United States and South Korea. He noted that the relationship has become one of equals and that during his time at the NSC the allies began talking about the alliance in terms of shared interests and values, as well the mutual respect each side shares. The goal has been to make the alliance one that is resistant to changes in political parties and ideologies in both countries. However, North Korea does use its propaganda to sow division between the allies. He said that he does not share concerns about inter-Korean relations getting too far ahead of denuclearization talks, as it’s hard to envision North Korea pursuing inter-Korean relations without addressing the

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nuclear issue. The two issues go hand-in-hand. He also noted that the alliance has been able to maintain deterrence despite the changes in military exercises and suggested that pressure has produced the changes that we have seen in North Korea’s behavior.

While much of the focus during the session was on the U.S.-Korea alliance, Soeya Yoshida noted that Japan remains an important part of the U.S.-Korea alliance framework because of the military support U.S. rear bases in Japan play. On North Korea, he suggested that he believes that Kim Jong-un is serious about economic reform. He noted that this is not a position that is shared in Japan and the United States, but that its time to realize that Kim is serious and that we should engage him. However, this will have to be in his preferred phased process. If we do engage it will be a long and difficult process, but eventually Kim will reach a point where it will be difficult to go either back out of reforms or go forward. That is where the real negotiations will begin. This will require significant cooperation and strategic thinking by South Korea and the United States, but he is concerned that at the moment the Blue House sees the United States and Japan as obstacles to its objectives.

On the potential for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, he also noted that Japan and China are having discussions about cooperation on the BRI and Japan’s Indo-Pacific initiative. The two countries could find common ground on economic cooperation. In the Indo-Pacific area, there could be both geostrategic and economic aspects to policy and there is no reason why South Korea could not cooperate on the economic aspect. Soeya also noted that finding common ground on economic aspects of the BRI and the Indo-Pacific initiative could be one way to engage a rising China in a positive fashion.

Zhu Feng noted that the U.S.-Korea alliance has anchored peace on the Korean Peninsula and has been in China’s interest for the last four decades. He believes that it can continue to be so in the future. He noted that China has strategic anxiety about the relationship, but that unless the U.S. increases its deployments in South Korea that anxiety will not become overwrought. He also suggested that South Korea is sophisticated in its handling of relations with the United States and China, and therefore also helps to play a role in minimizing conflict between the two.

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