

The ASAN INSTITUTE
for POLICY STUDIES
Lee Joon-gyu
Chairman
2022.06.14.

The continuing power of diplomacy

Located between continental and maritime forces, the Korean Peninsula is destined to be vulnerable geopolitically. But the Republic of Korea has successfully transformed from a country that received aid after World War II to an advanced country that offers aid. And diplomacy played a special role in the process.

The Korean Council on Foreign Relations, whose members are 2,000 former and incumbent diplomats, held a ceremony to mark its 50th anniversary on June 8. It was launched in December 1991, and the ceremony was delayed by a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. About 200 members including former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon attended the event.

"During the process of the Republic of Korea's development from one of the poorest countries in the world to a country that is a part of global backbone, diplomacy has played a leading role, and countless diplomats have offered dedication, sacrifices and hard work," I said during the event. "I think we must feel proud of what we have accomplished."

Although we take the country's current status for granted, the peninsula's future was exceedingly uncertain when it was liberated from Japan's colonial rule in August 1945. In December 1945, a decision was made at the Moscow Conference that Korea would be placed under a four-power trusteeship. The country faced great turmoil until the decision was overturned and a general election was held in the South on May 10, 1948 to found the Republic of Korea on Aug. 15 of that year.

During the process, the Korean people's anti-trusteeship movement played a key role, but we cannot deny that the founding President Syngman Rhee's fierce diplomacy toward the United States and the United Nations had a significant impact. Some are now arguing that the Korea-U.S. alliance and the U.S. troops stationing in Korea are to satisfy the needs of the United States, but Washington had no intention to extend the stationing of the American troops in the South after Korea's liberation in 1945.

Detecting the intention, Rhee made persistent demands to the U.S. to pledge its defense of Korea before the U.S. troops' withdrawal in 1949. Rhee, then, pressured Washington with his signature brinkmanship

such as the release of anti-Communist prisoners of war during the armistice negotiation in the Korean War. His efforts managed to realize the Korea-U.S. mutual defense treaty in July 1953.

Since then, Korea served as a bastion of the anti-Communist front as a determined member of the liberal arena until the early 1970s, when the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union peaked. To earn votes in the United Nations, Korea expanded its diplomatic arena to South and Central Americas and Africa. At the Non-Aligned Movement, of which North Korea was a strong member, South Korea also worked hard to expand its influence as a non-member country.

It took a vigorous negotiation of 10 years to normalize diplomatic relations with Japan. The Treaty of Basic Relations between the two countries signed in 1965 served as a stepping stone for the development of the Korean economy.

In the post-Cold War era, South Korea pushed forward Northern Diplomacy and accomplished grand achievements of normalizing relations with not only Communist countries of Eastern Europe but also the Soviet Union and China. In contrast, North Korea saw no progress in its efforts to improve ties with the western community, including the United States and Japan.

If South Korea was located near Australia or New Zealand, it would have been treated as a power in the region even with its current powers. Although Korea is the world's 10th largest economy, its geopolitical location, surrounded by superpowers, limits its leverage in international relations. Due to this geopolitical weakness, diplomacy is more important for Korea than for other countries. Effectiveness in investing in diplomacy is high, while the damage is also large when diplomacy fails.

Uncertainty is growing due to escalating strategic competition between America and China, a long war in Ukraine and the possibility of North Korea's seventh nuclear test, while a new economic and diplomatic area is being created with the launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. At this moment, diplomacy is more crucial than ever. We need to utilize all our diplomatic assets for the country.

To this end, it is necessary to utilize the experiences and wisdom career diplomats have accumulated over decades and boost their morale. The foreign affairs budget, which accounts for less than 1 percent of the government's total budget, must be increased and diplomatic infrastructure should be overhauled and expanded.

* The view expressed herein was published on June 14 in the Korea JoongAng Daily and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies