

Trump and the ROK-U.S. Alliance

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Former President Trump stated in a recent interview with Time Magazine that South Korea should shoulder more defense costs and hinted at the possibility of withdrawing U.S. troops if South Korea does not pay more. South Korea's defense cost-sharing increased by 35% from 950 billion won in 2017, when he took office, to 1.29 trillion won in 2023.

While Mr. Trump claims that South Korea does not treat the United States properly, most Koreans trust the United States. In a survey conducted by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in September 2023 marking the 70th anniversary of the ROK-U.S. alliance, 91.6% of respondents answered that the alliance is important. This reflects the deep trust and respect of South Koreans towards the United States. This trust and respect stem not only from the military and economic power of the United States but also because the United States represents the values of freedom and democracy.

It is said that during the Cold War Americans viewed the Soviet Union with “fear and contempt,” while Soviets viewed the United States with “fear and respect.” The reason the United States won the Cold War was the power that not only brought fear with their military strength, but also earned respect from the citizens of its adversary.

Let us compare alliances to a marriage. Just as a marriage is built on trust and respect for each other to build a family and raise children, alliances also need mutual respect and trust to be maintained and developed. Trump's idea of alliances as solely based on economic cost-benefit calculation will undermine the trust and respect of allied countries towards the United States. Rather, this may lead to America's isolation. For a family to maintain harmony, there needs to be an understanding of each other's roles and a sense of ‘us.’ It is hardly possible to maintain a family if a husband demands his wife financially contributes to the family and threatens divorce if she does not do so.

If the perception that the United States is a large and selfish country grows, its reputation will be shaken, and it will be isolated in the international community. The victory of the camp of

liberal democracy was due to the contributions of numerous allied countries. In Northeast Asia, where communist forces such as the former Soviet Union, China, and North Korea threatened freedom and peace during the Cold War era, South Korea was able to remain a stronghold of freedom and democracy thanks to the efforts the alliance and South Korean people.

In January 1950, then-U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson made the mistake of excluding South Korea from the Far East Defense Perimeter. This led to the outbreak of the Korean War just six months later. The United States, through the UN Security Council, formed the UN forces and rallied troops from 16 countries to send combat troops and seven countries to provide medical support, defending South Korea against communist aggression under the UN flag. During the Korean War, approximately one million civilians, 150,000 South Korean soldiers, 34,000 US soldiers, and a total of 41,000 UN troops, including civilians, lost their lives. Since no amount of money can replace human lives, if Mr. Trump had been the U.S. president at that time, what would have happened? South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world with little economic interests to the United States. He would have done nothing. Just watching.

The inscription on the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., reads, “Our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met.” We can wonder how Mr. Trump would have interpreted this inscription.

The Korean Peninsula is a geopolitical point where the security interests of major powers intersect. The Korean War was orchestrated by communist forces to expand their influence across the Eurasian continent using North Korea as a front. This suggests that had South Korea been communized, Japan would have also faced serious threats and the situation in the Western Pacific would have been very unstable. The flourishing of the United States and the liberal international order would have been difficult and today’s world history would have been rewritten.

Mr. Trump has often voiced complaints about allies not contributing ‘fairly.’ The word ‘mutual’ in the ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty does not imply unilateral protection by the United States for South Korea. Should the security of the United States be threatened, South Korea is also committed to defending the United States, exemplifying the essence of ‘mutual’ defense. According to a survey by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, the majority of South Korean people believe that the United States would support South Korea in a similar scenario (91.5%) and that South Korea should reciprocate by supporting the United States (92.4%).

In February, during the confirmation hearing of Samuel Paparo for the position of U.S. Indo-Pacific Commander at the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, he said, “The ROK’s defense expenditures remain the highest among our allies and partners as a percentage of their GDP.” John Hamre, President of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, argued, “The United States Forces Korea (USFK) are not mercenaries who defend South Korea in return for money,” adding that “U.S. troops serve the purpose of defending the U.S.”

Even when there is dissatisfaction regarding defense burden-sharing, behaving recklessly towards allies, as Mr. Trump did, is not right. Each nation is considered to have equal standing and is granted one vote, aligning with the principle of sovereign equality upheld by the UN and other international organizations. Mr. Trump, neglecting this principle, persists in advocating his stance under the assumption of U.S. superiority, thus tarnishing the United States’ image as a defender of the liberal international order. Amidst the era of U.S.-China strategic rivalry, the United States must reconsider its primary strength. Many countries agree with U.S. values and participate in its strategy because they perceive a restraint from the United States in pursuing unilateralism solely for its own interests.

The self-centered mindset of Mr. Trump risks destabilizing alliances and jeopardizing the liberal international order that the United States has established and safeguarded.

* The view expressed herein was published on May 13 in The Chosun Ilbo and does not necessarily reflect the views of The Asan Institute for Policy Studies