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The president knows the answer

Even if economic interests are important, Korea can't bet on China completely..

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The Nixon Doctrine stated that Asian countries should undertake their own defense, and in the following year on Aug. 25, 1970, U.S. Vice President Spiro Agnew came to Korea to negotiate a reduction of the U.S. Forces in the country. At the time, Korea had been threatened by North Korea's armed provocations, including the Jan. 21 Incident in 1968 - when a team of North Korean commandos attempted to attack the Blue House and assassinate President Park Chung Hee - and the armed infiltration in Uljin and Samcheok in 1969. To Korea, Washington's move to reduce the USFK and Agnew's visit were serious.

The Blue House's then-Chief of Staff Kim Chung-yum recalls that President Park Chung Hee had postponed all other schedules for two weeks before meeting with Agnew to focus on the issue. In the two meetings with the American vice president, President Park demanded that they discuss the USFK downsizing and Korea's security simultaneously, the modernization of ROK military equipment and long-term military assistance, and that no more than 20,000 troops leave the country. Vice President Agnew said that the 7th Division may leave, but the 2nd Division would stay, and the reduction would be within 20,000 troops so it would not affect Korea's national security. President Park felt assured.

However, on the flight to Taipei after the meeting, Agnew gave a press conference with reporters and said that when the Korean military becomes modernized, probably within the next five years, the USFK could withdraw completely. The comment was reported by foreign media. It was virtually a declaration that the United States was giving up on the Korean Peninsula. Feeling betrayed, President Park ordered a self-reliant national defense strategy and the development of high-tech weapons while seeking improvement in inter-Korean relations through the July 4 Inter-Korean Joint Statement. Moreover, he reinforced the alliance with Japan and secretly sought the possibility of building ties with China. Seoul was making an all-out response to Washington's "abandonment strategy."

Many things have changed between then and the visit to Seoul by Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. In a meeting with President Park Geun-hye on Dec. 6, Biden said, "It's never been a good bet to bet against America," and "America will continue to place its bet on South Korea." No matter how we interpret it, the comments sound like a warning not to be stirred by China's emergence, to continue the close alliance with the United States and not to leave the cooperative union with the United States and Japan. Vice President Agnew was concerned of America getting "entrapped" in Korean Peninsula issues and tried to abandon Korea, but Biden revealed Washington's intention to involve Korea in America's new Asia-Pacific strategy.

President Park Geun-hye was wise to respond, "Korea will continue to develop a strategic partnership with China to contribute to the peace and development of the region." If she had sided with Washington and bet "all-in" in holding China in check, it would have had considerable repercussions. The Seoul-Beijing relations would have been aggravated, Beijing-Pyongyang relations would improve and the inter-Korean relationship would be rocked for sure. While the "double-dipping" strategy of relying on the United States for security and leaning on China for the economy works best for now, we can't be sure how long it will last.

Moreover, even if economic interests are important, Korea can't bet on China completely. Lukewarm diplomacy could lead to abandonment by both America and China and ultimately isolation. Yet we cannot attempt to bypass the United States and China and stand alone. Aggressive, self-reliant defense through nuclear armament or the passive diplomacy of declaring permanent neutrality cannot resolve Korea's dilemma. It is truly a complicated situation.

What should the Park Geun-hye administration choose in the end? Let's review what President Park Chung Hee did four decades ago. First, we need to clearly state our will for self-reliant national defense. Second, we should be wary of excessive dependency on the Korea-U.S. alliance and prepare diplomatic groundwork to escape from the traps of "abandonment" and "entrapment." That's why improving inter-Korean relations is inevitable despite the atrociousness of the North Korean regime. Third, Korea needs to take the initiative to create the mood for peace and cooperation so that China's relations with America and Japan can improve. To prepare the atmosphere, good relationships with neighbors and balanced foreign policy are required. Especially, we cannot refuse cooperation with Japan, which is in a similar situation.

The solution can be found from the Korean Peninsula trust process and the Northeast

Asia Peace and Cooperation Plan. President Park already knows the answer. We need to carry it out through creative diplomacy and bold determination. We must not break the well-planned foreign policy strategy by getting tangled in unexpected variables and failing to read the overall drift of the Northeast Asian region.

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