

This article by PCI Board Member Chung-in Moon appeared in the Korea JoongAng Daily on March 27, 2017.

Learning when to say yes and no

No leader should go along with plans that could damage the lives and assets of the country's own people.

Mar 27,2017

Leading presidential candidate Moon Jae-in has gotten himself into a pickle. The New York Times on March 10 reported on the growing possibility of Moon bringing the liberals back to power in the upcoming May 9 election. The paper predicted changes in Seoul's North Korea policy if Moon comes to power as he has been skeptical of the hawkish stance of the conservative governments of South Korea and the United States.

Even as he calls himself "America's friend" and the alliance a "pillar of our diplomacy," Moon said Korea should learn to "say no to the Americans." When his comment raised controversy, he explained that what he meant was that Korea should be able to say "no" out of national interest. The New York Times also changed its tone a bit on its online edition by saying "misstated the context." But local conservatives did not let Moon off that easily. They lashed out at him as an "anti-American blinded with ambition to win the election."

At the University of California, San Diego, a symposium was held on the theme of Korean politics and foreign policy in crisis. Some of the speakers discussed Korea saying no to the U.S. in comparison with Japan and China. They were concerned that Moon may be succeeding his former boss President Roh Moo-hyun's contentious attitude toward Washington that pushed the bilateral relationship to its worst state. In fact, the traditional ties could become even worse given the impromptu and fiery nature of President Donald Trump.

But two former State Department officials did not agree. When the alliance is considered as a means to serve national interests, the United States and Korea cannot always pursue the same interests, they said. If there are differences, allies should talk them out and negotiate to sustain a healthy relationship. What can really hurt the alliance is unexpected and out-of-the-ordinary behavior from one after feigning complete agreement, they said.

They also claimed that if Seoul speaks out when it has a different thought and boldly cooperates upon necessity, it will win greater trust from Washington. For instance, Roh, whom the George W. Bush administration distrusted, went ahead with agendas such as dispatching Korean troops to assist U.S. engagement in Iraq, the relocation of a U.S. military base to Pyeongtaek and a bilateral free trade agreement. They advised that South Korean leaders should be able to disagree with the United States, yet willingly accepted its requests if they are helpful to national interests.

Statesmanship lies in the ability to say yes or no at the right time. The former U.S. bureaucrats well versed in Korean affairs said the next Korean president will not easily agree to Trump's unilateral foreign policy, military actions including a pre-emptive strike on North Korea, bearing the entire cost of U.S. troops in South Korea and nullification of the existing free trade deal.

The Seoul government vehemently resisted to trade pressure from Washington in the late 1980s, and the Kim Young-sam government strongly opposed President Bill Clinton's plan to attack North Korea's nuclear facilities in Yongbyon in 1994. No leader should go along with plans that could damage the lives and assets of the country's own people.

The next Korean president could get swept up in a regional conflict. If skirmishes arise between China and Taiwan or in the East or South China Sea, Washington could demand military engagement from Seoul. But Seoul will hardly accept such requests, the two former officials predicted, given its high economic reliance on China and geopolitical risks. In 2003, Roh maintained that Korea did not want to be pulled into a regional conflict against its will when the Bush administration called for Seoul's cooperation in a move to enhance its strategic flexibility.

The officials also warned that Korea could be asked for greater contribution to overseas engagements. As Trump's top priority is clamping down on militant Islamists, he could demand Seoul send combat troops to Iraq or Syria. But Korea cannot easily accept the call since such actions could put its people and nation in danger of becoming terrorist targets. Regardless of who wins the election, the next Korean president will be increasingly forced to say "no" to Washington. Fixation that we must either say yes or no to allies' requests could bring about a greater backlash, as clearly seen in the diplomatic fallout with China over Thaad.

The question of whether the leader can say yes or no to Washington should not sway the election as it does not help our national interests. The question of a rash anti- or pro-U.S. stance to stimulate populist sentiment could bring about a dearer price in our diplomatic path.

Translation by the Korea JoongAng Daily staff.

JoongAng Ilbo, March 25, Page 31

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