

[Column] After tariff typhoon, is a security storm in store for Korea next?

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Bold new ideas are needed to respond to US demands about Korea's security



South Korean President Lee Jae-myung (left) and US President Donald Trump (right). (pool photo; AP/Yonhap)

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Korea got some good news from Washington just one day before the US had threatened to impose new tariffs on Aug. 1.

US President Donald Trump announced he would lower Korea's reciprocal tariffs to 15% on condition that Korea set up a US\$350 billion fund for investing in the manufacturing sector and purchase US\$100 billion of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and other energy products.

The Korean government also announced it would not liberalize the country's farming market, including imports of beef and rice.

Despite the time crunch, the new Korean administration under President Lee Jae-myung managed to ink a deal comparable to those reached by Japan and the EU.

The deal came with some political dividends.

Trump finally broke his silence on Lee's election when he announced the negotiation results on Truth Social. He promised to meet with Lee at the White House in the next two weeks while remarking he "would also like to congratulate the new president on his electoral success."

Trump's unexpected remarks undercut widespread worries that he was displeased with Korea's new government.

But Koreans can't relax quite yet. While the tariff typhoon may have blown over, a security storm is still blowing our way — namely, the push to "modernize" the ROK-US alliance. That agenda includes such issues as raising Korea's defense budget, adjusting the size and role of US Forces Korea (USFK) and transferring wartime operational control (OPCON) of the Korean military, as well as the question of whether Korea and the US should maintain an integrated defense system.

Trump has consistently voiced dissatisfaction with Korea since 2016, threatening to pull out American troops unless Korea covers a larger share of defense costs, declaring that the age of free-riding allies is over, and stating that the US wouldn't intervene in a war between South and North Korea.

That's why Trump is likely to link the fate of USFK to Korea taking on a bigger share of joint defense costs and boosting its defense spending to 5% of GDP.

Trump's MAGA base has raised even more fundamental issues.

MAGA is opposed to US troops being stationed overseas. They think Korea treats USFK as a "tripwire" that would provoke a massive US military response in the event of a war. They're also concerned that USFK would be the target of a preemptive strike either by North Korea or China. As such, they want US troops on the peninsula to be drawn down or withdrawn altogether.

In contrast, American hard-liners on China want USFK's role to be adjusted, and expanded, from deterrence against North Korea to containment of China. Toward that end, they advocate giving the force "strategic flexibility." The same hard-liners call for the South Korean military to not only provide deterrence against North Korea but also to become active participants in the US' Indo-Pacific strategy.

About a week ago, Chosun Ilbo managing editor Yang Sang-hun made an even more shocking claim in a column titled "The USFK that we know is already being drawn down."

Yang argued that the US 2nd Infantry Division and the Seventh Air Force's mission had been compromised for several reasons, including the development of revolutionary long-range weapons capable of rapid strikes, the increasing capabilities of the South Korean military, and uncertainty about South Korea's participation in the US' strategy of countering China.

To be sure, the Washington mainstream — including Congress — has stressed that the US policy of stationing troops in Korea is unchanged. But that rhetoric cannot fully conceal various indications that USFK will be readjusted, reduced or removed.

Importantly, these topics are likely to be addressed during the upcoming Korea-US summit.

The plaintive appeals of the past will hardly prove an effective response this time. What's needed are bold new ideas.

Korea needs to respectfully express its gratitude for the US' past security commitments while clearly and confidently stating it no longer expects a free ride on security. We must propose a reassignment of roles that will make the ROK-US alliance more beneficial to both sides and commit to the South Korean military becoming the primary force in charge of the country's defense.

The OPCON transfer is an essential part of any such plan.

Korea successfully completed the first stage of assessment for the OPCON transfer — the assessment of initial operational capability — in August 2019, as part of a push to complete the transfer within the presidency of Moon Jae-in.

But because of the outbreak of COVID-19, as well as various other factors, Korea was unable to complete the second and third stages, or in other words assessment of full operational capability and full mission capability.

Korea needs to boldly carry out the second and third stages of assessment and complete the transfer without getting hung up on the various conditions outlined in the original plan — namely, ability to lead an integrated defense, capability of responding to North Korea's nuclear weapon and missile threats, and a security environment conducive to the OPCON transfer on the peninsula and in the wider region.

And whereas the Moon administration had wanted Korean and American troops to be led by a unified command system, Korea needs to give serious thought to a parallel command structure between USFK and the Korean military, like the arrangement used in Japan.

There are a few prerequisites for this process, such as securing the US' extended deterrence — commonly known as the “nuclear umbrella” — and acquiring supplementary resources on a temporary basis (intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance assets).

It's time we stopped getting so worked up about the size and status of USFK.

We need to deal with this situation proactively. After all, Korea is no longer a puny, powerless country that could be knocked over by the weakest breeze.

Instead, we should take this as an opportunity to acquire strategic autonomy so that we can break free from the chronic cycle of American meddling and neglect.

That's how we can achieve independence in our national defense, while also forging a new path toward peace on the Korean Peninsula and finding a fresh solution to the North Korean nuclear issue.

Please direct questions or comments to [english@hani.co.kr]