

[Column] Korea will soon face a security dilemma like Europe's

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What Korea needs is preventive diplomacy and creative diplomacy



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“The US-led liberal international order and the transatlantic alliance are finished. Europe will have to find a new path forward.”

I received that text message from a German friend who attended the Munich Security Conference a few days ago. My friend was responding to remarks made in Munich by US Vice President

JD Vance and US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, remarks that resounded through Europe.

Hegseth, who is 44 years old this year, basically said that restoring Ukraine's pre-2014 borders is impractical, and Ukrainian admission to NATO isn't the solution to ending Russia's war against Ukraine. Hegseth left no doubt that the US will not intervene militarily for Ukraine's security after the war and that NATO troops should not be deployed as peacekeepers there.

Even more shocking were the remarks made by Vance, who is himself only 40 years old. Despite being invited to speak at a security conference, the US vice president did not address security issues and instead harangued European countries for their handling of democracy.

Vance rattled off a number of issues — immigration, freedom of expression and electoral systems — before delivering the bombshell declaration that the US will not provide security to European states who do not share the American values of the Trump administration.

Michael Waltz, the White House national security adviser, also called on all NATO member states to fulfill their promise to raise defense spending to 2% of GDP by the time of the NATO summit in June.

The US' heavy-handed tactics have elicited varying responses from Europe. Opinion makers want European governments to persuade the US, through dialogue and negotiations, to salvage the transatlantic alliance. But many others wonder whether European countries are vassal states of the US and want to seize this opportunity to create an independent framework for European security cooperation.

In particular, there are concerns that Europe could be left on the sidelines if Trump forges a strategic partnership with Russia to help the US manage its rivalry with China. Korea will soon confront the same security dilemma Europe currently faces. How are we supposed to deal with it?

First, it would be an error to indulge in hopeful thinking about Trump's America. Both Trump himself and his MAGA supporters take a dim view of Korea. They consider Korea a flagrant example of countries getting a "free ride" on American security guarantees. They even accuse the Korean government of seeking to use US troops in Korea as a "trip wire" to trigger automatic US intervention in a war on the Korean Peninsula.

Notably, Vance and Hegseth are members of the generation who fought in the US' "war on terror" in such countries as Iraq and Afghanistan. They share an antipathy for sending young American soldiers to die in other countries' wars. As such, Koreans' trusty appeal to an alliance forged in blood could backfire now.

Second, this issue needs to be tackled head-on. We need to transition to a security arrangement in which the Korean military provides the main muscle, and the US military provides reinforcements. Korea also needs to quickly complete the OPCON transfer, regaining wartime operational control of its military.

For Korea to reach a transactional deal with the Trump administration and preserve its alliance with the US, it must take ownership of its own defense and agree to tradeoffs inside the alliance framework.

If the Korean government plays its cards right, the US could still provide Korea with extended deterrence and naval and air support as an "offshore balancer" even without American boots on the ground. That would have the incidental benefit of easing pressure on Korea to shoulder its share of the cost.

Third, there is no reason for South Korea to oppose direct dealing between North Korea and the US, such as a summit between Trump and Kim Jong-un. Furthermore, complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization (CVID) can be retained as a goal without being an ironclad prerequisite for dialogue and negotiations.

What we particularly need right now is preventive diplomacy to defuse the danger of war and ease tensions on the Korean Peninsula through summit diplomacy between North Korea and the US. If that can be used to halt North Korea's nuclear activities and reduce its stockpiles of nuclear materials and warheads, the eventual abolition of its nuclear program can be pursued gradually as a medium- or long-term goal.

To be sure, South Korea must not allow itself to be sidelined in that process, and North Korea-US denuclearization talks must be tied to establishing peace on the Korean Peninsula. Finally, we need creative foreign policy that can build peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia while avoiding the danger of being entangled in the rivalry between the US and China.

It's critical that our diplomats work to build a new security arrangement for Northeast Asia. While Korea should maintain trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan, it needs to discard a rigid bloc-oriented approach to foreign policy. Instead, it should improve inter-Korean relations and invigorate trilateral cooperation with China and Japan while prudently managing relationships with North Korea, China and Russia.

The US in Trump's second term is not the US we've always known. We need to face up to that reality and find the wisdom and courage to navigate the challenges that will confront us going forward.

For that to be possible, however, we need to quickly wrap up our current domestic crisis and forge a national consensus on a grand strategy for our country.

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Original Korean