

all > Editorial & Opinion

## [Column] S. Korea should carefully consider its own national interest regarding alliance with the US

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**It is diplomats' job to reevaluate alliances to suit our interests, and they shouldn't be criticized for it**



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**By Moon Chung-in, professor emeritus at Yonsei University**

South Korea's conservative establishment has been harshly critical of the Moon administration's attitude toward the South Korea-US alliance. The latest controversy concerns recent remarks by Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha and Lee Soohyuck, South Korean ambassador to the US.

During a video conference hosted by the Asia Society on Sept. 25, Kang described the alliance with the US as an important anchor for Korea but said that Korea would probably not join the Quad Plus framework if that meant automatically disregarding the interests of other countries.

Lee's contentious remarks came during the parliamentary audit on Oct. 12. "Just because South Korea chose the US 70 years ago doesn't mean it must choose the US for the next 70 years. Moving forward, we can only choose the US if that's in our national interest," Lee said.

The conservative opposition party and some newspapers have said that such remarks greatly harm the South Korea-US alliance and inflict a deadly blow on the national interest. They insist that these remarks reveal that the South Korean government intends to betray the US and side with China.

Even setting aside the national interest, these critics assert, the South Korea-US alliance should be further strengthened because of our shared values and ideals, including democracy, human rights, liberty, and the market economy.

This argument might seem reasonable at first glance. But under the microscope, its flaws become apparent.

### **Misrepresenting Kang and Lee's remarks**

The first issue is its misrepresentation of Kang and Lee's remarks. Both Kang and Lee spoke on the presupposition that the South Korea-US alliance will be maintained in its present state. But what they argue is that South Korea ought to carefully examine the national interest when deciding the future character and direction of that alliance. In all honesty, I don't understand why that's so controversial.

More specifically, we need to be able to answer the following key questions before we abandon our strategic partnership with China and join ranks with our American allies.

The first question is whether the China policy currently being pursued by the Trump administration is legitimate and logical enough. As Harvard University professor Stephen Walt has observed, an alliance is greatly affected not only by the balance of power but by the balance of threat. That suggests that South Korea would need to feel a strong threat from China in order to join the US' front against China.

**Koreans don't feel a "clear and present" danger from China**

But the majority of Koreans don't feel a "clear and present" threat from China. In fact, there are even suspicions that the US' move toward a confrontation with China, including containment, encirclement, and coercion, is due to the domestic political factor of the imminent presidential election. After all, the US is still far more powerful than China, and China itself wants a diplomatic solution.

During the 45 years of the Cold War, Koreans suffered from the division of the peninsula and the ensuing war, an entrenched military standoff, and the limitations of a divided country. Thus, they're hardly about to welcome yet another cold war.

The second question is whether South Korea's national security will improve if we march alongside the Americans. I'm skeptical about that.

Wholeheartedly joining the US-led front against China would require Korea to allow the installation of another THAAD battery and the forward deployment of intermediate-range ballistic missiles on the Korean Peninsula. Washington would also expect Seoul to actively participate in military actions in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea.

That would inevitably mean hostile relations with China and turn the Korean Peninsula into the front line of a new cold war. China would aim its Dongfeng missiles at South Korea and would make aggressive military moves in the Yellow Sea and South Korea's air defense identification zone, called KADIZ.

Could such a situation really be described as an improvement of our national security? Most sensible Koreans wouldn't want Korea to be entangled in a sharp military conflict between the US and China.

### **Siding with US in exclusion of China would only further endanger Korean Peninsula**

Third, siding with the US could further complicate the geopolitical alignment on the Korean Peninsula. Since China withdrew its military from North Korea in 1958, it has only provided extremely limited military assistance to the North.

Under a new cold war, however, China would bolster a trilateral alliance with North Korea and Russia. Beijing would generously provide Pyongyang not only with weaponry but also with petroleum and other logistical support.

Such developments would only make a peaceful solution to the North Korean nuclear issue even more improbable. Instead, it would definitely aggravate the threat of North Korea's conventional weapons.

We must not disregard the fact that expanding our alliance with the US could deepen our security dilemma.

### **Economic retaliation from China would be devastating to S. Korea**

The final consideration is the South Korean economy, which — needless to say — is part of our national interest. As of the end of 2019, China accounted for 25% of our exports and 21.3% of our imports, both figures double that of the US. If Korea were to artificially decouple from the Chinese market or incur economic retaliation from China, Korea would obviously suffer a serious shock.

Furthermore, that shock would hit SMEs and microenterprises in the tourism industry harder than it would hit conglomerates. It's doubtful whether the South Korean government would take action against China that could jeopardize the livelihood of those SMEs and microenterprises.

Let's return to the comments made by Kang Kyung-wha and Lee Soo-hyuck. They weren't trying to suggest that South Korea shouldn't maintain its alliance with the US. Rather, they were saying that South Korea ought to carefully consider its national interest when it sits down with the US to define the future character and direction of that alliance.

The challenge facing South Korea's diplomats is that shared values and historical continuity, while important, cannot take priority to the national interest. It's not helpful to blindly attack our diplomats as they attempt to tackle that challenge.

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