

Korean Diplomacy in an Era of Uncertainty

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We are currently living in an unpredictable world. International affairs, not to mention the domestic situation we are now witnessing, are testament to this fact. Last year was marked by important world events that even experts failed to predict: Brexit and the U.S. presidential election, to name but two. Due to their potential impact on international politics and economics, the world closely followed these two events. Most experts predicted the UK would vote to remain in the EU and Hillary Clinton's election, but the results were the opposite.

Since the end of last year, experts' outlook for international affairs in 2017 can be summed up in one word: uncertainty. The biggest uncertainty is the possible changes in U.S. foreign policy following the inauguration of Donald Trump. Based on President-elect Trump's behavior since he became a candidate and the composition of his foreign policy and security cabinet, experts forecast major changes in U.S. foreign policy. These policy shifts, along with the resulting changes in international relations, will increase uncertainty in East Asia.

First of all, signs of change are emerging in U.S.-China relations, the biggest variable in East Asian affairs. President-elect Trump's phone call with Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-wen, his subsequent questioning of U.S. adherence to the "One China" Policy, the Chinese Navy's seizure of a U.S. underwater drone, and the first exercise of Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning in the Western Pacific all herald coming turbulence in U.S.-China relations.

The Trump administration's policy toward China is likely to emphasize an 'economy-first' approach. His cabinet appointments reflect his strong pledge to revise unfair trade with China. He

newly established the White House National Trade Council (NTC) and nominated the renowned China critic and economist Dr. Peter Navarro as the head. For the top position of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), he selected Robert Lighthizer, a prominent trade attorney, negotiation expert, and a leading champion of American corporate interests. In an American television interview, Trump said, “I don’t know why we have to be bound by a ‘One China’ policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade”, breaking a long-standing political taboo. His comments have been read as an attempt to pressure China into revising unfair trade deals. How Trump’s ‘economy-first’ standpoint will be reflected in U.S. foreign policy toward China will be the focus of much attention.

Meanwhile, China’s strong response to pressure from the Trump administration will also create uncertainty in East Asia. As CSIS senior advisor Bonnie Glaser noted, China’s seizure of the U.S. underwater drone can be understood as a warning to Trump, as can China’s show of force with the aircraft carrier Liaoning. While the possibility of open confrontation is minimal, in the event of repeated military provocations, the potential for accidental military conflict cannot be ruled out. In addition, if China responds to U.S. economic pressure with retaliatory economic measures, the possibility of a trade war, which could greatly disrupt the global economy, also cannot be ruled out. Although China is well aware of its interdependent relationship with the U.S. and is likely to be mindful of the level of tension, it seems unlikely that Xi Jinping’s administration will back down from its ‘Zhǔdòng zuòwéi (to take initiative)’ foreign policy, which endures conflicts for the sake of protecting national interests. It is unclear whether and how the two countries can compromise their interests and reach a point of agreement.

Both Japan’s aim for ‘state normalization’ and Russia’s dreams of ‘revival’ are other variables that can complicate East Asian affairs. With the Abe administration likely to remain in office for an extended period, Japan will try to be actively involved in international politics and security matters in the name of ‘positive pacifism’. Japan has been competing with China for regional influence, and if it strengthens its containment of China by reinforcing its alliance with the U.S. under the Trump administration and seeks to expand military roles, the regional situation will be further complicated. Unlike the Obama administration which clashed with Russia, the Trump administration has shown intention to mend relations with Russia; this may also affect the region. It remains to be seen how Russia, which had taken a pro-China policy against the U.S., will respond to what appear to be U.S. attempts at a pro-Russia policy aimed at containing China.

The changes in great power relations, and especially U.S.-China relations, are cause for concern for countries in the region. This is because, as the saying goes, “when whales fight, the shrimp’s back is broken.” Even in Taiwan, which welcomed the phone call between President-elect Trump and

President Tsai Ing-wen, concerns were raised that Trump's motive behind straying from the 'One China' policy was to use Taiwan as a negotiation tool with China. Many Asian countries are anxiously watching the Trump administration's Asia policy that reportedly attempts to modify President Obama's foreign policy. Meanwhile anxiety in the region is further intensified by China's forceful side-splitting strategy, which aims for greater regional influence through economic power. China has demanded that the Korean government withdraw its decision to deploy THAAD, and is also making a show of force towards Singapore, which is known to have not sided with China in the South China Sea dispute, by seizing nine Singaporean armored vehicles that were being shipped through Hong Kong.

This instability of East Asian affairs puts a heavy burden on South Korean diplomacy because it must urgently resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. In its Policy Briefing for 2017, the Korean Foreign Ministry anticipated that "this year's diplomatic and security environment would reach its most grave point since the end of Cold War". Indeed, many challenges are arising simultaneously. At the start of the year, North Korea announced it would test-fire an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and threatened to resume provocations. Close cooperation between South Korea and the U.S. is needed for a joint response to North Korea's accelerating nuclear missile capability. There must also be extended discussions between South Korea and the U.S. on U.S. foreign policy toward the Korean Peninsula under the unpredictable President-elect Trump and ex-military hardliners. Resolving conflicts with China has become a pressing issue because China has been mobilizing various measures of pressure, including a ban on Hallyu, in order to stop the deployment of THAAD in South Korea. To make matters worse, even Japan has been pressuring South Korea by taking issue with the installment of the Statue of Peace (also called 'comfort women' monument), creating a need to ensure stable South Korea-Japan relations.

Domestic and foreign affairs are two sides of the same coin. Unstable domestic affairs weaken strength in foreign affairs. Amidst increasing anxiety about uncertain international affairs, unrest in a country's leadership can shake our diplomacy. At such a time, we have to firmly deal with foreign affairs, in accordance with the principle of practical diplomacy and national interests. A country should avoid being penny-wise and pound-foolish due to ideology, emotions, or political interests. It is time for the government, National Assembly, political parties, media, and NGOs to gather strength and wisdom to prevent internal and external troubles.

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