

EAI COLUMN

June 5, 2015
ISBN 979-11-86226-36-0
95340

Translation
Benjamin A. Engel
Jaesung Ryu

Acknowledgement
This column was originally published in Korean by EAI on June 3, 2015 and can be found [here](#).

EAI Column presents fresh, constructive opinions and policy suggestions on Korean society and politics as well as East Asian security and international relations issues from recognized experts.

Please acknowledge the source of this article if used as a citation.

The EAI is a nonprofit and independent research organization in Korea. The contents of this article do not necessarily reflect the views of EAI.

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D
Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu
Seoul 100-786
Republic of Korea

© EAI 2015

www.eai.or.kr

Towards a Successful ROK-U.S. Summit

Sook-Jong Lee
EAI President / Sungkyunkwan University

The upcoming June 16th summit between South Korean President Park Geun-hye and U.S. President Barack Obama is quickly approaching. For President Park, her visit to the U.S. will mark her fourth summit with President Obama since she took office. Back in May of 2013, her address to a joint session of Congress laid foundations for a lasting trust between the two countries. Building upon this trust, the upcoming summit represents an opportunity for both leaders to engage in frank, working-level discussions and to reaffirm their mutual willingness towards greater cooperation. While it may be difficult for President Park to overlook the fact that some may pass judgment on her by comparing her visit to that of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the pending visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in September, the key to a successful trip lies in obtaining actual results. In other words, it is time for South Korea and the U.S. to discuss specifics beneath the symbolism.

It goes without saying that the most important topic during the summit will be North Korea's increasingly threatening nuclear and missile programs. Although the Obama administration has repeatedly stated that any threats from North Korea will be vigorously met by the strong ROK-U.S. alliance, reports of North Korea's increasing nuclear stockpile, miniaturization efforts, longer ballistic missile range, and its development of SLBMs are a source of much anxiety for the citizens of

South Korea. For the past five years, the U.S. policy of "strategic patience" has urged North Korea to show its sincere willingness to denuclearize and return to the negotiating table. But the seemingly endless wait is taxing the patience of many as their disappointment grows along with North Korea's intransigence. Patience with no carrots or sticks seems more like negligence, and North Korea is capitalizing on the wasted time as it increases its bargaining position. Just as the Iran nuclear talks are important, President Park should be able to remind President Obama of the exigency presented by North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and urge him to invest more of his personal interest and leadership in the matter. Clearly a nuclear Iran in the Middle East is a serious problem for a region that continues to suffer from countless conflicts, but the fact that at least 6-8 nuclear bombs are already in the hands of an adventurous, unstable, and young Kim Jong Un makes the North Korean nuclear issue all the more dangerous.

South Korea has much to say about the situation in Northeast Asia as well, but consideration on how to express their concerns is needed. South Korea is in a position where it must deepen economic and political cooperation with China while strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance which is the bedrock of South Korean national security. While many leaders in Washington understand South Korea's predicament, there

"[President Park] can create a sensation in Washington..... and present a message delivered in the spirit of forgiveness and harmony which calls for Japan and South Korea to pursue a peaceful and prosperous Asia together."

are some who believe the South Korea is walking a tightrope between Washington and Beijing and, even worse, others who may worry about outright deception on the part of Seoul. Here, the South Korean government shoulders some of the responsibility for these misunderstandings given it sometimes takes ambiguous positions or simply states a position without substantial discussions on pending issues such as the introduction of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system or joining the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). During this visit to Washington, President Park must dispel these types of misunderstandings by once again clarifying the importance of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Only when there is complete trust between the U.S. and South Korea can South Korea's path towards developing relations with China be comfortable. Using the simple and naive logic of "America for security, China for the economy" is not an appropriate solution to a complex foreign affairs problem, and the implementation of such a strategy does not provide the U.S. with a sufficient degree of assurance that it can continue to trust South Korea.

With regards to the deterioration of ROK-Japan relations, a problem which worries the U.S. greatly, the recent resumption of high level talks between South Korea and Japan has allowed the relationship to begin improving. Yet South Korea needs to make it clear that its policy regarding Japan is not completely tied to the history issue. Leaders in Washington, including President Obama, are on Korea's side when it comes to settling issues regarding Japanese colonialism including the comfort women issue, but at the same time they also hold the position that military cooperation with Japan must be expanded. In this regard, even though Korea

speaks the truth with regards to history, a mere reiteration of criticism against Prime Minister Abe's perception of the past would actually have a reverse effect. President Park, during her speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), should move past Prime Minister Abe's failings and shed new light on the importance of the ROK-Japan relationship within a suitable future-oriented vision given the 70th anniversary of Korea's independence. She can create a sensation in Washington by going beyond the demands for a sincere apology and compensation and ceasing to play the role of victim, and instead present a message delivered in the spirit of forgiveness and harmony which calls for Japan and South Korea to pursue a peaceful and prosperous Asia together. This kind of future-oriented and constructive message is also desirable in that even after President Park returns to Korea her speech will positively influence Prime Minister Abe towards a similar message in his remarks during the 70th anniversary of Japan's defeat in World War II. If the tensions between South Korea and Japan cannot be relieved, not only will an impasse be encountered within the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation, but South Korea's Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative, which it has been highlighted as a regional plan, will also be unable to gain traction.

The ROK-U.S. alliance is developing and transitioning from cooperation between two countries into a global partnership given their cooperation in a number of areas including global outreach programs, preventing the spread of dangerous diseases, disaster relief, and peacekeeping operations, just to name a few. Koreans and Americans are pursuing global peace together based on their common national spirits that showcase a great deal of

courage and forward-thinking. And although the always difficult nuclear North Korea problem looms large, the strong and successful history of the ROK-U.S. alliance calls for President Park to be powerful and confident as she strides into the upcoming summit in Washington. ■

—— *Sook-Jong Lee* is the EAI President, and a professor at Sungkyunkwan University. Currently, Dr. Lee holds advisory positions in the South Korean government, including the Presidential National Security Advisory Group, Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation and councils for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Unification, and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). She also participates as member of the Trilateral Commission, Council of Councils, and many other transnational networks on research and policy studies. Dr. Lee received her B.A. from Yonsei University, and M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University.