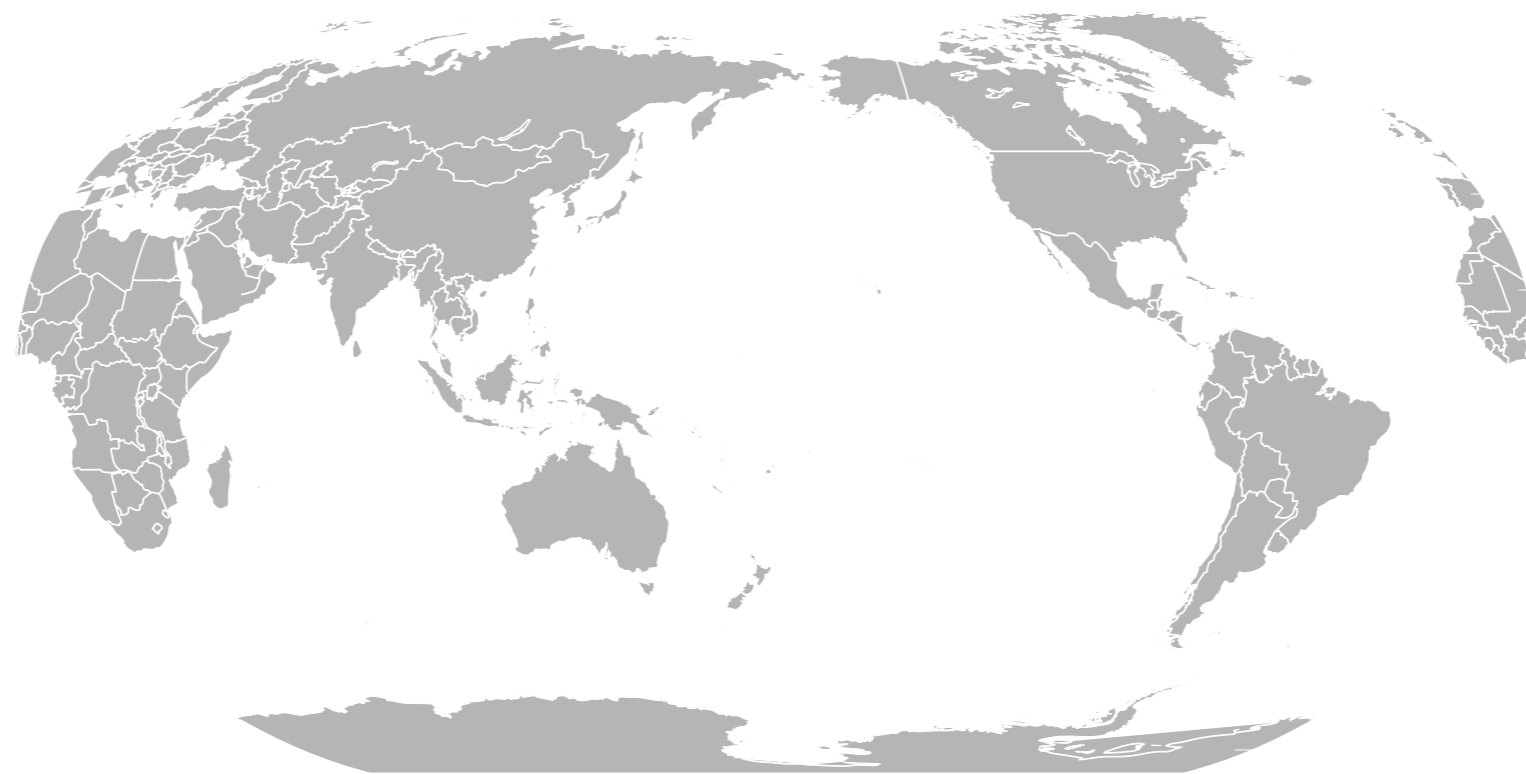


Securing the Alliance : Changing Demands - Enhancing Perspectives



Developments in NATO and the ROK-U.S. alliance

Introduction

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Korea Office held a closed webinar on “Securing the Alliance: Changing Demands-Enhancing Perspective” on 30 April 2021. The webinar was attended by experts on international politics and defense policy with the governments and non-governmental organizations of South Korea and Germany.

The participants compared and analyzed the U.S. strategies for Europe and the Indo-Pacific and assessed what impacts they had on NATO and the ROK-U.S. alliance. In particular, they compared the major policies of the Trump administration and the newly launched Biden administration diachronically in relation to the aforementioned two alliances and extensively addressed what risks, if any, those policies posed to the defense of the ROK and Germany and their respective alliance policies.

Main findings

Recently a sizable change has been looming on the global geopolitical chessboard. Tensions in security and military areas appear to spill over into the areas of economy and technology. As Sino-U.S. rivalry is intensifying, with the rise of China, the response of Washington has been the scene stealer in international politics.

U.S. National Security Strategy (2017), U.S. National Defense Strategy (2018) and U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (2019) defined the Sino-U.S. relations as one of strategic competition, and declared China as a strategic competitor to the U.S. Consequently, the Indo-Pacific region has turned into a hot potato and geopolitical networks like the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between the U.S., Australia, India and Japan) are beginning to assume an additional role in the regional and international order. The cataclysmic change in the international security arena caused by the Sino-U.S. rivalry has become a new major factor to consider in the security stability and national interest of Korea.

This geopolitical change does not affect Korea only. Countries sharing common values with South Korea face a similar reality. South Korea faces a new challenge and threat to its national security in the form of a Sino-U.S. rivalry in addition to the threat from North Korea. Naturally, the role of the combined defense system of the ROK-U.S. military alliance appears in a new light. NATO, of which Germany is a member, is also monitoring closely what is taking shape amid expectations that the U.S. policy regarding NATO may undergo changes.

The webinar took place with its sights set on figuring out any new circumstances the two alliances face amid grand changes, responses required, and the correct perspectives thereof. The participating experts from the ROK and Germany took stock of their respective bilateral relations with the U.S., and made suggestions as to how future bi- and multilateral or other forms of cooperation and defense policies should reflect the changing situations.

1. NATO

As Europe was confronted with the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, members of NATO began to demand that NATO assumes a new role. NATO argued that Russia was violating the INF (Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces) Treaty and had launched an offensive campaign instead of dialogue. NATO believed, it was urgent to strengthen its military capabilities in response.

Russia has not always and not to the same degree been viewed as a “threat” to members of NATO. The Strategic Concept 2010 issued by NATO even considered Russia a strategic partner. Even if Russia is considered more of a threat, members of NATO differ in the level of criticizing Russia in view of their respective strategic interests. No wonder it is an extremely difficult and complicated process for NATO members to meet each other halfway and forge a united front. NATO should be understood not as a homogeneous organization, but as an alliance of nations who try to take advantage of it for their national interests. NATO is premised on political agreement and joint action, and therefore it is imperative to forge unity among its members, sharing a common political agenda as a military alliance.

Another task for European allies is maintaining consensus on how to deal with the United States. Previous U.S. President Donald Trump famously put America First, openly doubted the value of NATO, and proclaimed the U.S. would reduce its contributions to the alliance and sternly deal with unfair trade. On that line, he insisted on a sharp increase of members’ defense burden sharing and planned to redeploy a large share of U.S. forces out of Germany. NATO and its members are hopeful that the inauguration of Joe Biden and his administration, which stresses restoration of alliances and multilateral cooperation, will lead to a restored transatlantic partnership.

Three expectations regarding the scheduled NATO summit in June 2021 were presented at the webinar:

One was for it to be a catalyst for reinforced relations between the U.S. and Europe. A second was a reemphasis of demands for greater financial contributions to NATO from European allies, which had been present long before the Trump administration. Thirdly, NATO will refer to China also as a security concern in stronger terms than they had done at the summit held in London in 2019 in commemoration of its 70th anniversary, whereas cooperation between allies and partner countries, amid increasing Sino-U.S. rivalry, will be further intensified.

2. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and the ROK-U.S. Alliance

Today, the U.S. is marshalling its security resources to thwart any acts impinging on its security interest in the Indo-Pacific region. The U.S. move is geared to curtail China's expansionism. Washington believes that China's flexing of its military and economic muscle is causing a crack in the existing balance of power and regional order. The Biden administration has been emphasizing since its inauguration that strong alliances and preserving the status quo are at the core of U.S. security. Therefore, his administration is trying to confront China by dint of extended deterrence as well as collective security through repairing strategic partnerships and alliances. That is why the U.S. is adamant about ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and multinational joint military drills in the Indo-Pacific region, etc.

What would happen to the ROK-U.S. alliance? The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and the ROK-U.S. alliance appear to be compatible enough. Perspectives for peace on the Korean peninsula and the DPRK are major security concerns of the ROK-U.S. alliance. According to the experts, measures to suppress North Korea's military threats will be reinforced further, and it remains to be seen what will transpire from the summit talks between President Moon Jae-In and President Joe Biden vis-à-vis peace processes on the Korean peninsula. An argument was made at the webinar, that the two leaders should reach a complete agreement on the security policy for the sake of the ROK-US alliance and North Korea's human rights issue should be on the table as well. There is no doubt that the ROK-US alliance will remain a linchpin of peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.

However, the ROK-U.S. Alliance faces several issues. Firstly, Washington has criticized Seoul for maintaining strategic ambiguity between the U.S. and China. Being conscious of this issue, the U.S. has urged South Korea to join regional security cooperation schemes such as Quad. Secondly, there are issues related to ROK-U.S. defense burden sharing. NATO allies are in a similar situation. The ROK-U.S. burden sharing negotiation went through difficulties from 2019 during the Trump administration and their 2020 defense contribution amount was not determined. However, the Biden administration promptly signed the ROK-U.S. Special Measures Agreement (SMA) in March 2021. South Korea's defense contributions for 2020 was frozen to the level of 2019, while its contributions for 2021 were determined at KRW 1,183.3 billion (USD 1.1 billion), an increase of 13.9% from that of 2020. Seoul and Washington have had differing opinions over the method and timing of wartime operational control (OPCON) transfer, which is an important presidential agenda of the Moon Jae-in administration.

The U.S. is trying to contain and decouple from China in the sectors of economy and technology. Decoupling, which is often used to describe the U.S.-China hegemony competition, refers to the phenomenon where two countries decreasingly cooperate or align with each other but set different standards and compete against each other, e.g. in politics, trade, and technology or other areas.

The South Korean experts all agreed that it is no more valid to say that South Korea is holding onto strategic ambiguity between the U.S. and China. With the ROK-U.S. summit coming up, South Korea was expected to take part more actively in cooperating with the U.S. in terms of defense as well as in terms of new technology, vaccines, and climate change, including the ROK-U.S. alliance but also Quad. Such a move might look different from the strategic ambiguity that had been maintained by South Korea so far. Meanwhile, some experts think that South Korea appears to be hesitant in joining the free and open Indo-Pacific concept, due to external factors.

Lastly, the U.S. and the ROK have different priorities from each other in terms of security policies. As specified in the U.S. National Security Strategy and U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, the U.S. placed China in higher priority over North Korea in its national security policy. For South Korea, however, the top priority remains undoubtedly North Korea. Bordering and standing in confrontation with the DPRK, the ROK is sensitive to potential direct military provocation and strategic weapons of North Korea. As the only ally of the DPRK, China is seen as potential mediator to achieve denuclearization. This causes the dilemma for South Korea to maintain harmonious relations with both the U.S. and China under a variety of complicated scenarios.

3. Germany

Considering its geographical location and the roles it plays, Germany is at the very center of Europe and NATO. The gist of Germany's stance is 'a strong and enduring transatlantic partnership' and 'europeanization', as prominently exemplified by Franco-German Friendship. Germany has traditionally advocated the expansion of the EU's role and European integration. And Germany also has the world's 7th largest defense budget, makes the 4th largest contribution to NATO following the U.S., U.K., and France, and has constantly built up its defense budget for the past 8 years which is estimated to reach approximately EUR 51 billion (USD 60 billion) as of 2020. As a highly active member to NATO, Germany connects eastern Europe, western Europe, the EU and Atlantic regions. Germany does not possess nuclear arsenals and takes a strongly negative stance on launching independent military operations, but has precedents in sending troops overseas in pursuit of collective defense schemes such as NATO for all forms of cooperation besides defending their national territory.

However, the German political system usually leads to coalition governments. Therefore, politicians from different parties serve as their ministers. This is one reason that consensus on national defense and security policies is sometimes difficult to achieve, even before parliamentary debate in the German Bundestag which proceeds with intensive debate of each of the subdivided agenda items. The next German federal election is scheduled for 26 September 2021, and Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has been in office since 2005, is not running for reelection. Therefore, Germany will see a new federal government coming up regardless of the electoral outcome, which makes it reasonable to wait and see how the new federal government will alter the details of generally stable German foreign and security policies, including towards the EU and NATO. Considering public opinion among the younger generations in Germany in particular, that Germany should make greater contribution to and play a more prominent role in the global security landscape, German security policies might be presented in a clearer manner in the future.

As one example, in September 2020 the German "Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific" were adapted by the German government. In this policy guideline, Germany emphasizes that as a proponent of a rules-based international order, it respects mutual sovereignty and highly values multilateral cooperation, while also stressing the importance of the Indo-Pacific region and intraregional cooperation. Germany also unveiled its plan to send a frigate to the region in 2021. There is a keen interest in the potential political message sent by Germany to countries in the Indo-Pacific and partners there and beyond, including China, the U.S. and Korea.

Conclusion

The inauguration of Joe Biden has already caused many readjustments in American foreign and security policy. The U.S. President is stressing the recovery of alliances and value-based multilateral cooperation. Notwithstanding, its relations with the People's Republic of China are unchanged gaining paramount importance. U.S.-China systemic competition is growing in security, economy, technology and other spheres. The U.S. administration seemingly upholds its predecessor's U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy in general and efforts of coordination with allies and partners to check and answer the comprehensive nature of China's rise.

The ROK-U.S. alliance and NATO remain major pillars of U.S. foreign and security policy. Beyond North Korea and Russia, China is moving more and more towards top of the agenda in the alliances. NATO is challenged once more to bridge natural divergences of perceptions and national interests among its member states. Germany, in particular, published its "Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific" and is contributing to the discussions in both NATO and the European Union - and will and must continue doing so after upcoming elections.

South Korea has so far chosen 'strategic ambiguity' to navigate its course between being a reliable U.S. ally and its economic interdependency and complex relations with China. However, calls for active participation and more roles in the Indo-Pacific have increased. South Korea should look beyond endogenous challenges in its alliance with the United States, and find answers reflecting its national interest.

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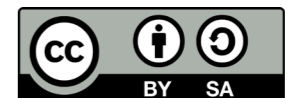
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