ROK Self-reliant Defense and the US Commitment

Hyock Sup Lee

The US-Korean relationship might be metaphorized by a maturing adult-child relationship. Both countries need to consider seriously how to modernize the partnership and avoid putting at risk the traditional cooperation between the two countries. In spite of their original spirit to ensure Korean security, US security commitments could actually be destabilizing the national security of the ROK and the region by undermining the democratic foundation of its political system. The bilateral security system is no longer necessary.

Technically the two Koreas are still at war and operational control of ROK forces is legally American, but this fails to represent the reality of the long-term cease-fire. The absence of operational control over its own armed forces has been a focus of controversy regarding South Korean sovereignty. It makes us theoretically unable to hold meaningful dialogue with North Korea, and even when the promised transfer of full operational right is achieved, should severe American anti-DPRK measures occur, it would generate another crisis and hamper our national integration. Without a sincere concern for this problem the ROK Force Improvement Program, even with a large budget allocation, expands the quantity but hardly the true self-reliant system of ROK forces.

The arms race between North and South Korea must somehow be restrained. ROK forces do need to be improved, but carefully and in balance with those of the DPRK not so as to stimulate their further buildup. Measurement of the North-South balance of forces should include certain invisible factors. The current offensive DPRK military posture requires tremendous expenditure for precious little strategic gain, and North Korea is thus effectively deterred. Without doubling
their forces they are simply not strong enough to attack the South. The direct economic cost would be unacceptable and they would kiss off urgently needed foreign economic help.

We may also need to be more patient in the face of DPRK nuclear issues. The US nuclear arsenal was always justified as if, due to the disparity in conventional military inventories between North and South Korea, the value of a nuclear deterrent were self-evident. But nuclear weapons hardly seem necessary any longer for our security. It is time for both North and South to dismantle the obsolete nuclear contingency apparatus that has been put into place over the past thirty years.

If the United States’ strategic interest in the Peninsula stays stuck in the old ways, it will make Korean democratic development very difficult: the US and the ROK need to create new agreements to replace the old. But the US need not be frightened by a momentous dilution of American regional influence. Instead, by mediating between the actors (China, Japan, DPRK, ROK and Russia) facing each other, the US can also play the most decisive role in activating North-South detente.

The Korean War had three basic causes: Kim Il Sung’s invasion, an untimely American retrenchment, and the inability of the ROK to defend itself. The former two have usually been overemphasized and the third largely ignored, but it is the most fundamental. Then when Korea was divided, Kim Il Sung had the full support of the Soviets and freedom of political maneuver, but the US military government monopolized the legal authority to govern the South. The present US-ROK alliance system is essentially the same as the 1950 version; no meaningful revision has been made since. At this point, ROK self-reliance and self-defense capability are the most crucial factors in ensuring political stability in this region.