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## [Column] In defense of Sue Mi Terry

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**While the final decision will be reached by the US judiciary, the affair offers us several things to consider**



**By Chung-in Moon, James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University**

The more I think about it, the weirder it gets — the scandal about Sue Mi Terry’s indictment by US federal prosecutors, I mean.

It came as a real shock when news broke about a New York grand jury’s indictment of Terry, who had been a major advocate of the ROK-US alliance at a major think tank in Washington, DC. Before that, she had held a senior position as a foreign policy and national security adviser for the US government.

The charges Terry is facing are straightforward. She’s alleged to have violated the US Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) by acting as an agent for the Korean government without registering herself as such with the US Department of Justice.

While Terry acknowledges she interacted with officials from both the American and South Korean governments as a North Korea analyst in Washington, she denies ever having represented Seoul.

Terry’s guilt or innocence will be determined by a courtroom jury, but there are several aspects of the whole affair that continue to baffle me.

The indictment against Terry states that she began to work for Seoul in 2014, specifically citing an article called “A Korea Whole and Free” that she published in *Foreign Affairs* in that journal’s July issue.

In the article, she argued that North Korea’s collapse was imminent and that North Korea’s absorption by the South would be in everybody’s interests. She even suggested that the benefits of the North Korean regime’s collapse would outweigh the costs while calling for policymakers in South Korea and the US to prepare for a military intervention aimed at unifying the Korean Peninsula.

Around that time, a professorial colleague of mine and I published a rebuttal of Terry's article in the same journal in which we argued that the North Korean regime's collapse was in fact not imminent, that neither regime collapse nor unification by absorption was in everybody's interests, and that military intervention by South Korea and the US would cause enormous harm.

In fact, Terry's argument was in direct opposition to the "unification as bonanza" narrative advanced by Korean President Park Geun-hye early in her presidency.

The indictment against Terry also states that during the presidency of Moon Jae-in, she was working as an illegal agent for the Korean government in exchange for fancy meals and name-brand handbags that she received from a Korean diplomat-cum-secret agent acting as her handler.

That doesn't make much sense to me either. While I was serving as special presidential adviser for foreign affairs and national security, I recall Terry as being the Washington pundit who was most critical of the Moon administration's policy toward North Korea and Japan.

When the Moon administration declared it would postpone the automatic renewal of its GSOMIA information-sharing agreement with Japan, for example, Terry was one of the most vociferous critics of that decision. That was hardly the only thing she took issue with — she also opposed Moon's push for an end-of-war declaration, his advocacy of the Korean Peninsula peace process, and basically his whole policy toward the ROK-US alliance.

At least for the Moon administration, Terry was a Korean Peninsula expert who was extremely hard to handle.

Ultimately, there seem to be two possible scenarios here. The first is that Korean government officials failed in their attempt to win Terry over. The other is that she was simply acting on her own convictions, with no connection to the Korean government. In either case, she was hardly acting as an "illegal agent" for Seoul.

The grand jury's indictment asserts that Terry became more overt in her support of Korean government positions after Yoon Suk-yeol became president in May 2022.

But there's something else that bothers me here. On Dec. 8, 2022, Terry co-organized a symposium titled "Retrospective on the Jeju April 3 Incident, Human Rights, and Alliance" with the Jeju 4.3 Peace Foundation and a US-based NGO in her capacity as director of the Asia Program for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, a nonpartisan think tank in DC.

That was a highly irregular decision in light of the typical practices of Washington think tanks.

The people of Jeju Island have long called for the US to acknowledge its role in and responsibility for the Jeju April 3 Incident, which began during the US' military government of South Korea, and to take corresponding measures. While the symposium represented part of an ongoing discussion about that incident inside the US, there were clear indications that the Yoon administration wasn't happy about it.

Yet Terry didn't refrain from co-sponsoring the symposium. I even remember her remarking that the US government needs to voice regret about the tragic events on Jeju Island for the future of the ROK-US alliance, which is grounded in the shared values of democracy, peace, freedom and justice.

The more closely I look into all this, the less likely it seems that Terry was an agent for the Korean government. Instead, she seems to have been faithful to her conviction in American values, and America's national interest.

The final decision will be reached by the US judiciary, of course, but in the meantime, the affair offers us several things to consider.

First, the US and South Korea, despite being tight-knit allies, each have their own institutions and systems, and they must respect those differences.

Second, this is another reminder that while we cannot overstress the importance of public diplomacy with the US, all such initiatives must remain strictly within the bounds of American laws and institutions. That's why official diplomacy should remain our primary approach, while acknowledging the value of utilizing sympathetic figures inside the US.

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