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[Column] Suggestions for Yoon to build facts-based foreign policy

Posted on : Apr.4,2022 16:32 KST Modified on : Apr.4,2022 16:32 KST

As the person responsible for the lives and possessions of 50 million Koreans, the commander-in-chief must not stoop to spur-of-the-movement adventurism or radical unilateralism



Korean Central News Agency reported on March 25 that North Korea had carried out a test of its Hwasong-17 ICBM with leader Kim Jong-un in attendance. (KCNA/Yonhap News)



Moon Chung-in

By Moon Chung-in, chairman of the Sejong Institute

The Korean Peninsula is facing a trifold challenge.

First, North Korea has been stepping up the offensive by test-firing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) since it scrapped the testing moratorium it had maintained since 2018. Second, the situation in Ukraine remains unpredictable, and though that doesn't pose a direct military threat to South Korea, its geopolitical and geoeconomic ramifications will be considerable. Third, the relationship between the US and China, which are rapidly moving toward a new Cold War, is sure to put Korea in a serious bind.

As Yoon Suk-yeol prepares to be inaugurated as South Korea's president on May 10, his complicated task is to simultaneously navigate those three challenges while preventing war and achieving peace and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. In connection with that, I would like to offer the president-elect several suggestions.

First, Yoon needs to make sure not to get fixated on his campaign promises. Tom Foley, the former speaker of the US House of Representatives, gave the following advice: Making too many promises in a campaign is a forgivable blunder, but trying to implement them all

is an unforgivable sin.

It's natural for the various promises a candidate makes during their campaign to run into practical obstacles after they take office. That's especially true in a democratic system, which is characterized by compromise and consensus. Disregarding those characteristics in one's obsession with carrying out every promise is sure to bring about undesired consequences and foment national division.

In contrast to general public policy, foreign policy and national security policy involve counterparts and are apt to face powerful challenges and limitations from both within and beyond.

A good example is the idea of a preemptive strike against North Korea that Yoon has mentioned. Overemphasizing a preemptive strike in military doctrine and North Korea policy is likely to push the North Koreans to be more aggressive in their own strategy and doctrine.

If both sides settle on making large-scale preemptive strikes and tolerating escalation in their crisis response plans, strategic stability on the Korean Peninsula might become severely damaged. That's probably why the US and other related countries have expressed concerns about these matters.

The same is true of allowing the US to deploy more batteries of its Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, missile-defense system. It might seem reasonable to respond to North Korea's ballistic missile forces by strengthening our interception capabilities, but the reality is more complicated.

The impact of a Chinese response could extend to the military realm, and counteracting serious economic retaliation would not be easy. As events in 2017 illustrated, there would be substantial pushback from the small business owners and ordinary people whose livelihoods would be jeopardized in that process.

In the same context, trilateral security cooperation between South Korea, the US and Japan could prove to be a double-edged sword. If North Korea test-fires another ICBM or carries out its seventh nuclear weapon test, there may well be a public debate about holding trilateral joint military exercises off the east or west coasts of the Korean Peninsula. But given the current tenor of public opinion, that could also prove incendiary in terms of domestic politics. That's a lesson we can learn from South Korea and Japan's closed-door decision to set up their GSOMIA military intelligence-sharing arrangement in 2012.

In that sense, I'm encouraged by Yoon's recent emphasis on the national interest and pragmatism, which are two critical principles in foreign policy and national security policy.

If the national interest is what determines a country's goals and direction, pragmatism is what provides solutions for issues that arise. Pragmatism represents the empirical approach of relying on the facts when pursuing the truth and seeking solutions.

But there was little evidence of such an attitude in the promises Yoon made during his campaign.

Take for example Yoon's position that North Korea must denuclearize before sanctions can be lifted. Pyongyang not only has nuclear facilities, fissile materials and nuclear warheads, but also a variety of delivery systems, including ICBMs. It's not realistic to expect that a "denuclearization first" strategy of sanctions and pressure will be enough to convince Pyongyang to abandon all those assets. That's a reality we need to face squarely as we work on more sophisticated alternatives.

Cooperation with the US is essential for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue and for maintaining the security of the Korean Peninsula. But our two countries' national interests can't coincide completely on every issue. While our alliance may be ironclad, not every policy held by Washington is necessarily correct. If we repeatedly accept every US policy without due consideration, we may find ourselves facing unintended consequences.

In addition, it's not wise to reject every policy of the previous government without considering its content. Even if Yoon believes that the Moon administration's Korean Peninsula peace process wasn't a success, he needs the wisdom and the courage to scrutinize the causes and infer the correct lessons.

A country's president is the final guardian of national security and architect of peace. The ultimate mission of the presidency is minimizing risk while maximizing the national interest. As the person responsible for the lives and possessions of 50 million Koreans, the commander-in-chief must not stoop to spur-of-the-movement adventurism or radical unilateralism.

Roh Moo-hyun eventually approved sending troops to Iraq despite his personal objections, Lee Myung-bak took into account the political intricacy of relations with Japan, and Moon Jae-in never stopped cooperating with the US even while prioritizing inter-Korean relations. I suspect all three of those former presidents experienced similar soul-searching on those issues.

I hope Yoon will remember that he is no exception to the structural limitations faced by his predecessors.

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