

## **Talking Points on US-China Rivalry and Korea-ASEAN Strategic Cooperation: What Next?"**

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When the world No. 1 and No. 2 economies are battling for their mutual interests and fair shares, the international community has become very anxious as it has to take the tolls in whatever forms. For Asia, the unpredictable dynamics of Sino-US rivalry would yield more dramatic and long-lasting repercussions due to its overall unsettling attitude towards China's rise and President Xi Jinping's new foreign policy. In the US case, the source of traditional security confidence is no longer as strong or reliable as before. At this juncture, questions arise whether Washington would be able to maintain its all-weather security guarantor in the Indo-Pacific region.

As one of the pro-active US allies in Asia, Korea cannot avoid the ripple effects resulting from Sino-US strategic competition. Under President Donald Trump, Korea has been under great pressure to increase security burden sharing of the US presence in the Korean Peninsula, especially the US troops stationing there. Trump's American First has bolstered the views that Washington has been spending too much financial resource in providing security protection for countries far away. Of late, Korea continues to approach its northern rival with olive branches albeit repeated failures to secure commitments of full denuclearization there. Seoul continues to call for a resumption of the Trump-Kim summit and appeal for continued dialogues among all protagonists. This approach must be given strong supports after all the two Koreas would have a decisive role in determining their common future.

From China's perspective, whatever strategic choices Korea has taken up in responding to a new security environment or perceived threats, nonetheless, it would be considered as parts of US grand strategy. Beijing has yet to appreciate Seoul's policy adjustment and fresh overtures seeking to ease tensions in Korean Peninsula for the long-term goal of peace and stability in Northeast Asia. When Korea decided to station THAAD in its territory to counter growing nuclear threats from North Korea, China reacted strongly considering the move as a serious threats to its security. As such, increase dialogue and consultations among security apparatus of both countries are urgent and necessary.

Outside China, President Moon Jae-in's initiatives have been well received, especially in Asean. The New Southern Policy is also a clear manifestation of Korea's fresh effort to engage the Indo-Pacific region through coalition with neutral players. With this framework, Korea can work together with Asean and its dialogue partners to work out security arrangement that would involve countries in the region. Such coalition of willing among friends would be heard in a new era in emerging regional architecture.

The continued Sino-US contest would strengthen further Korea-ASEAN relations further. When the Korean War broke out, Thailand and the Philippines, two major Asean members, sent troops to join the UN-supported international forces. When the now defunct Korean Energy Development Organization was formed in early 1990s', major ASEAN countries joined KEDO viewing such a move as an insurance for sustaining peace and stability in the region. After the 1997 summit in Kuala Lumpur when leaders from ASEAN meeting up with their counterparts from China, Japan and Korea, the security of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia became intertwined as never before seen. Since then the term "East Asia" has become popularized to depict the region of dynamic Northeast and Southeast Asia. Now it is time to search for common approach to end the source of conflicts in the Korean Peninsula.

The resumption of recent meeting of Seoul-based Trilateral Commission was a good indicator that the overall improvement of Asia's three great economies are necessary if future peace and prosperity is to continue unabated. Korea, as a middle power, plays an important role to ensure that the trilateral ties are strong, sustainable and predictable. Korea, which has no territorial dispute and historical baggage with ASEAN members, can serve as a facilitator for trust and confident building.

At the upcoming third summit between Asean and Korean leaders in November 2019, they have the unique opportunity to bring their relations to a higher level by institutionalizing their summit meeting, transforming it into an annual event. Furthermore, the first Mekong-Korean Summit should also be held annually back to back to future ASEAN summits. Both China and Japan have enjoyed extra meetings with leader from Mekong riparian countries.

If and when North Korea complies to the UN resolutions and has made acceptable progress in denuclearization as it has been promising, ASEAN would have a unique role to play in socialize Pyongyang to the regional scheme of things. Vietnam could lead ASEAN members to provide assistance to North Korea for economic development policy while maintaining existing political structures, something which Laos and Vietnam have done successfully with their economic reforms while keeping traditional political structure.