Proud South Korea and Its Independent Politics?

At first, the author considered writing an article about further demands from “South Korea’s progressive society” to fire the U.S. Ambassador to the ROK, but then he realized there was more to the criticism directed towards the American by looking at the issue from a broader perspective.

If one focuses on Moon Jae-in’s speeches and public performances staged by pro-governmental NGOs, you may be left with the impression that the South Korean President is pursuing an independent foreign policy course by trying to distance it from that of the United States and protecting the nation’s interests, in the inter-Korean dialogue too. But if, instead, we take facts and not words into consideration, we will notice a similar pattern emerging time and time again.

At first a challenge arises and its impact on the country’s politics or economy may seem negative. Moon Jae-in and his circle make a number of widely-publicized statements about the issue in Roh Moo-hyun’s style. The latter (a former President who died in 2009) loved telling the public that South Korea would never “lick America’s boots”. Washington is usually perplexed by such rhetoric. And it is often Harry B. Harris’s job as the U.S. Ambassador to South Korea to express his nation’s stance on any given issue. His response causes outrage, time and time again, among ROK’s “professional patriots”, who then proceed to criticize his moustache and Japanese background, and stage yet another competition to deface his portrait, by, for instance, throwing shoes at it. After a series of histrionic
speeches and anti-American protests, Seoul does everything that was asked of it, and the fact that South Korea did not acquiesce to the demands immediately is portrayed as an important foreign policy victory and a show of independence and national pride.

Let us recall some specific examples. The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which Moon Jae-in planned to withdraw from on account of the trade war, remains in place. An official explanation for such a decision was that Japan was expected to make concessions in return, but this has not happened yet. It is a positive development indeed that the Coronavirus has taken over the headlines and has also helped demonstrate what a real (and not hypothetical) blow to the nation’s economy actually looks like. And if we discount South Korean statements and look at the facts instead, it becomes clear that Japan is not waging a trade war against Seoul. There are no efforts to boycott Korean goods in contradiction to claims made by patriotic organizations at Cheong Wa Dae’s behest, who are supported by the ROK government in their openly racist campaigns. In fact, South Korea no longer enjoys a privileged status in Japan when it comes to trading certain goods, but it still receives strategically important materials. However, there is now more paperwork involved in this process.

Currently, rumors are circulating about the possibility of ending the agreement since no substantial progress has been made between the two sides during their talks. On 12 February 2020, a Cheong Wa Dae official stated that “maintaining South Korea’s agreement with Japan on exchanging military information” was “a ‘viable option’ depending on the neighboring country’s attitude on its export control against Seoul”. “GSOMIA is still a viable option for us,” the official said on condition of anonymity, adding there was “no final decision internally made yet”.

Spirited statements made by South Korea’s President about the fact that individual tours to North Korea would not violate UN sanctions and could even encourage the DPRK to return back to the negotiation table also came to nothing. The U.S. Department of State once again confirmed its position on the need to work together to ensure denuclearization of the DPRK. What this diplomatic statement essentially meant was that Washington would prefer that Seoul did not rush things. Harry B. Harris also called for Moon Jae-in “to consult with the U.S. about the tourism proposal to avoid” misunderstandings that may trigger sanctions (which could be imposed by the United States too). Such a response drew criticism from various communities in South Korea. And a Cheong Wa Dae official said that it was “very inappropriate for the Ambassador to make such a claim in the media over remarks made by the President of the host nation”. The Ministry of Unification also expressed concern about the Envoy’s remarks pointing out that the “policy with regard to North Korea” came under South Korea’s sovereignty. And one lawmaker said that his comments could “be seen as him meddling in domestic affairs”, which was not “helpful for the South Korea-U.S. alliance at all”.

In the meantime, Harry B. Harris continues to represent U.S. interests and to work hard on strengthening the bilateral relationship between Seoul and Washington, which means that his statements are not meant to infringe on South Korea’s sovereignty.

After that, Seoul began to backtrack on its position. On 17 January 2020, during a meeting with journalists at ROK Embassy in Washington, South Korea’s special representative for Korean Peninsula peace and security affairs Lee Do-hoon said that although individual tours to North Korea did not violate sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council, tourists could encounter problems when bringing electronic devices and other prohibited items into the DPRK. Hence, it was actually important to consult one’s allies on such issues. When asked whether the United States agreed that private tours to North Korea were not a violation of imposed sanctions or not, Lee Do-hoon avoided a direct response and instead said that any inter-Korean projects would be discussed during working negotiations with the United States. So much for the issue of “sovereignty”, after which the subject was no longer widely publicized and disappeared altogether with the advent of the Coronavirus.

There was a similar turn of events after the United States insisted that Seoul be a part of the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), a coalition of nations whose naval units are tasked with safeguarding navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. During his speech at the New Year’s news conference on 14 January, the South Korean President noted that stable relations with Tehran were important from an economic and political perspective, and that Iran was one of ROK’s suppliers of crude oil, where some South Korean construction companies had their operations. But when asked about the possibility of deploying South Korean naval forces to the Strait of Hormuz during the conference in January, Moon Jae-in admitted that the proposal was linked to several complex issues and promised to continue seeking a practical solution.

On 16 January 2020, Presidential Chief of Staff Noh Young-min said: “We have not yet decided on whether to participate as a member of IMSC,” and added that “the government could seek its own way to protect the lives and
And what was Seoul’s decision in the end? On 21 January, the government issued a statement saying that South Korea’s Cheonghae military unit (comprising its newest destroyer with special forces on board), officially tasked with combatting the threat posed by Somali pirates, would expand its operations from the Gulf of Aden to the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf. And South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense announced that “it would independently deploy the Cheonghae naval unit to the Strait of Hormuz”, which would “not be operating as part of the U.S.-led coalition in the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC)”. Apparently, this idea had been discussed since May 2019, hence the aforementioned move was not prompted by Washington.

In order to sweeten the pill, ROK Minister of National Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo has said that if the conflict between the United States and Iran were to turn into an armed confrontation, the ROKN Cheonghae unit, sent to the Strait of Hormuz, would not take sides in it. However, according to author’s sources, this does not prevent the naval unit from coordinating its military operations with the U.S. side.

Hence, it is not surprising that such “independent policies” have resulted in stalled inter-Korean talks. And North Korean media outlets have openly said that Moon Jae-in is not in the “driving seat”. But the author cannot help but ask the question: “How long will such populist games last?”. Such measures do not have a long “shelf life” and overusing them could have serious political repercussions. And at what stage will South Korean people begin to realize that “the emperor actually has no clothes on”.

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