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Chair

Young-Sun Ha

Panel

Chaesung Chun
Sook-Jong Lee

EAI Security Net Commentary seeks to play a leading role in providing profound perspectives and timely suggestions toward current issues.

The East Asia Institute
909 Sampoong B/D
310-68 Euljiro 4-ga
Jung-gu
Seoul 100-786
Republic of Korea

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Toward a Smart Alliance: The ROK-U.S. Relationship after President Obama's Asia Trip

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Asia is the region where a quarter of the total of American products is consumed, major bilateral allies exist, various networks of multilateral institutions operate, and new powers are rising. President Obama, during his first Asia trip, tried to emphasize that America is an Asia-Pacific power that will continue its commitment through a renewed East Asia strategy of "power of balance." Now at the crossroads of China's foreign policy of "harmony," Japan's new concept of "fraternity," and South Korea's catchphrase of "pragmatic foreign policy," the United States needs to refresh its role which has been defined as a "regional stabilizer." People in Asia are eager to see President Obama's new approach to his East Asia strategy, because he inherited from his predecessor a triple crisis in the areas of security, soft power, and economy. President Obama's recent Asia trip has certainly attracted the minds of many people in Asia with his concepts of strong "partnership," and a positive-sum Asian future, as expressed in his address at the Suntory Hall, Japan. As the communication power of a network becomes more important in 21st century international politics, President Obama's Asia trip means a lot with his efforts for public diplomacy.

Putting aside images and metaphors, the strategic orientation of the United States' East Asia strategy still needs to be more specified. People in Asia are concerned about four areas: 1) how the United States will cooperate with a rising China in producing a consensus in many sensitive and difficult areas such as mili-

tary competition, economic interdependence, climate change, and ideational orientation; 2) how the United States will redefine the role of bilateral alliances which should go beyond the task of military cooperation, stretching to regional security and non-traditional security issues; 3) how the United States will facilitate the creation and the development of multilateral cooperative institutions by actively participating in them; 4) and how the US will deal with security threats such as the North Korean nuclear crisis, cross-Strait relations, East Asian nationalism, and, most of all, regional power transition. So far, the United States seems to be more focused upon recovery from the economic crisis and getting help from various Asian partners in this effort. That leaves open the question of how to redefine the United States' role in the rapidly changing environment of Asian international relations.

Despite a relatively short stay in Seoul for about 20 hours, President Obama confirmed his commitment to South Korea with renewed words and statements: he underscored the importance of the KORUS FTA not just from an economic perspective, but also from a strategic standpoint; he promised to provide continued extended nuclear deterrence; he basically agreed with South Korea's approach to resolving the North Korean nuclear problem through a more comprehensive deal; and he highlighted new areas of cooperation at the global level such as climate change, Afghanistan, economic recovery, and the development

of the G-20. South Koreans expect that the KORUS FTA will be the stepping stone for strengthening bilateral economic and strategic relations, recovery of both countries' economies, and improving interdependent regional economic relations. Regarding the North Korean nuclear crisis, it seems that there is still a lot more to be done in making North Korea give up completely its nuclear program. This will require more intense and creative dialogue between Seoul and Washington. As North Korea has not made any strategic decision regarding its nuclear program and any future national strategic orientation, its return to the Six-Party Talks will only just be the beginning in yet another difficult series of negotiations. South Korea, as a strong American ally and a potential global middle power, will continue to work closely with the United States. The two countries need to search for new tasks and functions for bilateral cooperation in a world of rapidly changing international relations, where "smart" alliance and "21st century international statecraft" are required. ■