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The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D
Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu
Seoul 04548
Republic of Korea

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www.eai.or.kr

Rapid Reactions to U.S. Election Results: South Korean Perspective

Sook Jong Lee
East Asia Institute

Countries in the Asia-Pacific are anxious to see how the Trump administration will form its policy toward the region. During his campaign, President-Elect Donald Trump did not support conventional commitments to the security of the United States' Asian allies. His isolationist policies, if made into reality, will greatly affect a region where the U.S.-led hub-and-spoke alliance system has maintained stability and peace for decades. Of particular concern is the possibility that right-wing voices in Japan and South Korea, which have called for nuclear armament or more self-reliant defenses, will be amplified if faith in U.S. defense commitments begins to waver. A rejection of the Trans-Pacific Partnership or free trade renegotiations with South Korea would also bode ill for the region's already troubled economic growth. A rollback of the Obama administration's strategy of rebalancing to Asia would leave a vacuum China is likely to fill. Most Asian countries do not want to lose the region's most effective balancer against an assertive China.

The nuclear threat posed by North Korea will require immediate policy responses from the Trump administration. Two decades of failed denuclearization efforts have led to new proposals, such as a military strike or, on the other extreme, unconditional negotiations that would aim to freeze nuclear and missile tests in order to open the path to peace treaty talks. It is uncertain which Trump will pursue.

A rekindling of diplomatic efforts is highly preferable to a dramatic military solution, but the worst scenario would be one in which Trump neglects to act. If the United States sits idly by, there will be no time left to reverse North Korea's nuclear capabilities. Trump must focus on innovative policies to push North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to see that nuclear weapons possession undermines his survival rather than guarantees it. This path will only be possible if the Trump administration consults with and takes joint action with South Korea.

The Trump administration needs to reaffirm the role played by the United States in global governance. The isolationist sentiment and sharp social rifts revealed by the presidential campaign have left many in the world doubting whether the United States has the domestic support it needs to maintain a leading role in global affairs, but there remains hope that the new administration proves these doubts to be ill-founded. ■

— Sook Jong Lee is president of the East Asia Institute and professor of public administration at Sungkyunkwan University. Currently, she holds advisory positions in the South Korean government, including the Presidential National Security Advisory Group, Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation, etc.