Moon Jae-in Government’s Independent Strategy: Progress and Challenges

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Since taking office, the South Korean government led by President Moon Jae-in has adopted a diplomatic and security strategy with distinct progressive features, which can be generally summarized as “two blueprints, three objectives, four strategies, and five principles.” With an explicit pursuit of enhancing national independence, the strategy is independent in nature. As the strategy is implemented, the inter-Korean relationship has picked up, and there have been easing signs of the situation on the Korean Peninsula. The principal status of the Korean nation in Korean Peninsula affairs has also been strengthened. However, with the advance of the strategy, problems have also emerged in the alliance between South Korea and the United States, with their frictions increasingly going public. The US resistance to South Korea’s push for an independent strategy has become more prominent. An analysis of the Moon Jae-in government’s independent strategy and its implementation would not only deepen our understanding of South Korea’s diplomacy and the Korean Peninsula

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1 The two blueprints are to achieve peaceful coexistence and common prosperity. The three objectives are to resolve the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue and construct a lasting peace regime, promote the sustainable development of inter-Korean relations, and build a new economic community on the Korean Peninsula. The four strategies are to adopt a gradual and comprehensive approach, advance inter-Korean relations in parallel with resolving the nuclear issue, securing the sustainability of inter-Korean relations through institutionalization, and laying the foundation for peaceful unification through mutually beneficial cooperation. The five principles are to lead the resolution of Korean Peninsula issues, safeguard peace through strong defense, advance the development of inter-Korean relations in the spirit of mutual respect, attach importance to communicating with citizens and reaching consensus, and enhance the Korean Peninsula policy through cooperation with the international community. See “Moon Jae-in’s Korean Peninsula Policy,” ROK Ministry of Unification, https://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/policy/koreapolicy/koreanpeninsula.
issues, but also bear practical significance to developing China-South Korea relations and promoting peace and stability on the Peninsula.

Implementation of the Moon Jae-in Government’s Independent Strategy

By pursuing national independence, South Korea is in fact intending to change its over-reliance on the United States in terms of security and defense, and its role of a US follower in terms of foreign policy. The change is mostly reflected in the South Korean approach to the US-ROK alliance, North Korea, and the overall foreign policy. To fulfill its objective of building a “peaceful and prosperous Korean Peninsula,” which was set as one of the five policy goals when it took office in 2017, the Moon Jae-in government has put forward three major strategies in diplomacy and defense with distinct independent characteristics: 1) to build strong security and an independently responsible national defense, 2) to realize inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation as well as denuclearization on the Peninsula, and 3) to advance a truly pragmatic foreign policy while playing a leading role in international cooperation.

Enhancing independent defense capabilities in parallel with strengthening the ROK-US alliance

A strong defense force is the foundation for peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula. The Moon Jae-in government continues to view the ROK’s alliance with the United States as the pillar of national security and defense, and has been seeking to expand the basis of the alliance and strengthen the combined defense posture while finding an appropriate solution to outstanding issues between the two sides. By so doing, the ROK-US alliance would transcend a conventional military alliance and develop into a global strategic alliance that shares democratic and market economy values. During Moon Jae-in’s visit to the US in June 2017, leaders of the

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two countries affirmed their position of strengthening the bilateral alliance and maintaining lock-step coordination on policy regarding North Korea, and pledged to develop the ROK-US alliance into a multi-faceted and comprehensive strategic alliance. In *Future Defense Vision of the ROK-US Alliance*, a document jointly published by the two countries, the two sides reaffirmed the bilateral alliance as the linchpin for peace, stability, and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and the region.\(^3\) In practice, the Moon government went back on its promise made during the election campaign and deployed four more launch vehicles for the THAAD missile defense system, in order to support the United States’ construction of missile defense systems\(^4\) and strengthen the ROK-US alliance by concrete actions.

While stressing the alliance with the US, the Moon government attaches more importance to enhancing independent defense capabilities. In its security strategy, it explicitly expressed the commitment to taking back the wartime operational control of ROK forces and developing an ROK-led combined defense system between the two countries.\(^5\) It is actively improving its own defense capabilities, especially in critical areas such as the Korean three-axis defense system,\(^6\) to achieve an independent national defense corresponding to its economic power. In the June 2017 ROK-US summit meeting, leaders of the two countries agreed to “continue the Alliance’s work to expeditiously enable the conditions-based transfer of wartime operational control of ROK forces.”\(^7\) To implement the decision, the two sides conducted substantial

\(^4\) The ROK has pushed for the Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD), or a South Korea-type missile defense system, but the problem is whether the construction is necessary and whether the ROK government has the determination to advance it. See Han Xiandong, “Interest Differences, Strategic Disputes and Readjustment of ROK-US Alliance,” *Northeast Asia Forum*, No.1, 2010, p.28.
\(^6\) The South Korean three-axis defense system, which was renamed in early 2019 “system to respond to nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD),” consists of the Kill Chain (renamed Strategic Target Strike), the Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD, renamed Korean Missile Defense), and the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR, renamed Overwhelming Response). See ROK Ministry of National Defense, *National Defense White Paper*, pp.53-54.
consultations at the 2018 and 2019 annual bilateral Security Consultative Meetings, and have been closely coordinating on a stable transition to a new combined defense system following transfer of wartime operational control and reinforcement of the ROK forces’ defense capabilities.⁸

**Improving inter-Korean relations and promoting the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the establishment of a lasting peace regime**

Different from previous administrations, Moon Jae-in did not give a specific name to his North Korea policy, and instead adopted the generalized term of “Korean Peninsula policy.”⁹ Elaborated at Moon’s speech in Berlin on July 6, 2017, the policy highlights respect for North Korea’s political security and pursues a denuclearized Korean Peninsula with a peace regime established. In addition, it stresses advancing the vision of a new economic community on the Peninsula and enhancing inter-Korean communication and cooperation. Regarding the development of ties with the North, the Moon government underlines the necessity of continuing the South-North dialogue mechanism and hopes to institutionalize inter-Korean relations and peace on the Peninsula by signing a basic agreement. In his speech at the centennial commemoration of the March First Movement,¹⁰ Moon further emphasized that the ROK should take control of the Korean Peninsula situation, terminate the residual Cold War structure on the Peninsula, work to build a new order of peaceful cooperation, and create a lasting peace regime and an economic community.¹¹ This clearly manifests the President’s commitment to leadership and policy independence. On the issue of denuclearization, the Moon government has been leveraging

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¹⁰ The March First Movement, also called the Sam-il Independence Movement, was a series of demonstrations for Korean national independence from Japan that began on March 1, 1919, in the Korean capital city of Seoul and soon spread throughout the country.
the improvement of inter-Korean relations and leading the reactivation of relevant consultations, in the hope of consolidating peace on the Peninsula and laying the foundation for peaceful reunification. In practice, when North Korea and the United States encountered difficulty in their negotiation, the Moon government actively mediated between the two countries and facilitated the US-DPRK Hanoi summit and the US-ROK-DPRK tripartite meeting in Panmunjom. Moon has drawn up an action plan toward denuclearization and put forward the “entrance” to and “exit” from nuclear talks, while stressing the position of phased and comprehensive settlement with the concerns of both North Korea and the US considered.

Advancing a true and pragmatic major-country diplomacy while strengthening “Northeast Asia plus” multilateral cooperation

In its foreign policy toward the four major powers of China, the US, Japan and Russia, the Moon Jae-in government, besides focusing on the alliance with the US, has also valued developing ties with China. By conducting flexible and diverse types of high-level diplomacy, the Moon government hopes to overcome the trouble that the THAAD dispute has caused to China-ROK relations, and enhance cooperation with China on issues such as denuclearization and the free trade agreement, in order to achieve substantial progress in the bilateral strategic partnership with renewed mutual trust. Regarding relations with Japan, Moon intends to develop a mature and future-oriented partnership with Tokyo while urging the country to face history squarely. In relations with Russia, Moon has made significant progress in the bilateral strategic partnership by strengthening economic cooperation and strategic communication on the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue. Apart from diplomacy with the four powers, the Moon Jae-in government has been actively advancing multilateral cooperation, most

12 The “entrance” to and “exit” from nuclear talks as proposed by the Moon government are actually very similar to the idea of “dual suspension” and “dual-track approach” advocated by China, namely freezing North Korea’s nuclear and missile development as the “entrance” to denuclearization, and establishing a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula through improvement of inter-Korean and US-DPRK relations as the “exit.”
notably by putting forward the New Northern Policy and the New Southern Policy, which aim to build a platform of peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia, with South Korea serving as an “axis of peace,” and institutionalize the multilateral cooperation among major countries in the region. Meanwhile, as an “axis of prosperity” that transcends Northeast Asia, South Korea will upgrade its ties with ASEAN and India to expand its space of peaceful and prosperous development.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Motivations behind the Independent Strategy}

The South Korean politics in the post-Cold War era can be generally classified into two major camps of progressives and conservatives.\textsuperscript{14} Despite adopting a tough policy toward North Korea, the two successive conservative administrations of Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye failed to resolve the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue, instead making it more complicated. The South Korean people did not gain their due sense of security; moreover, the escalating tensions aggravated the risk of war. The efforts by conservative governments of South Korea to seek security from the United States not only damaged inter-Korean relations, but also brought the relationship with China to an impasse. The country was deeply trapped in a dilemma of balancing security and development interests. In this context,

\textsuperscript{14} It is difficult to find an explicit set of criteria to distinguish progressives from conservatives in South Korea. For a long time, academics and the media in the country used the terms “left wing” and “right wing” to address domestic political parties and social groups. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the terms have been gradually replaced by “progressives” and “conservatives” respectively. Despite an absence of accurate division, there are clear differences between the two camps. Progressives tend to change the status quo while conservatives tend to maintain it. On the policy toward North Korea, progressives generally stand on the position of common nationality and advocate the resolution of Korean Peninsula issues by improving relations with the North. Conservatives, from the perspective of dominating the unification process, usually adopt a tough and coercive position toward North Korea. Regarding the relations with the United States, progressives, while still stressing a solid alliance with the US, are more inclined to pursuing independence in state actions. On the contrary, conservatives actively strengthen the alliance and are more closely following US steps. Following the end of the Cold War, the administrations of Presidents Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun and Moon Jae-in were considered progressive, while the governments of Presidents Kim Young-sam, Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye were conservative.
South Korea's domestic political structure has changed, Park Geun-hye was impeached, and the approval rating of conservative parties hit rock bottom. All this, apparently originating from the scandal of interventions to the presidency by Park's aide, in fact represented the result of the Korean society’s review of state and national interests. Moon Jae-in took advantage of the very opportunity and initiated the “candlelight revolution” that centered on the pursuit of justice and fairness as well as state and national autonomy and independence. As the representative of the progressive camp, Moon ran for the subsequent election and was elected President.

As a leading progressive figure, Moon Jae-in considers the Korean Peninsula affairs as the internal business of the Korean people, and believes that these affairs should be independently handled by the South and the North themselves through improving inter-Korean relations and enhancing national reconciliation and cooperation.\(^{15}\) The Moon government’s independent strategy is not only driven by the progressive policy concept, but is also closely related to the diplomatic, security and domestic political environment that South Korea is in. Major considerations are as follows:

**Seeking to achieve peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula**

The situation on the Peninsula was tense when Moon took office. The preceding two conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye adopted maximum sanctions and pressure on North Korea together with the United States, which was only reciprocated by an increase of nuclear and missile capabilities from the North Korean side. The continuously spreading rhetoric of North Korean collapse and the Trump administration's high-profile show of force pushed the Korean Peninsula to the edge of war and posed a fundamental threat to South Korea's national interests. The Moon Jae-in government, which was entrusted at such a critical moment, overturned the tough and coercive approach adopted by preceding administrations, and emphasized on multiple public occasions

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that “war shall never be allowed on the Korean Peninsula” and that the South Korean government “does not want North Korea to collapse” and will not pursue “absorptive or artificial unification.” The position simultaneously served three purposes: effectively restraining the Trump administration’s attempt to resolve the problem by force, conciliating the increasingly aggressive North Korea, and closely communicating with those countries that have common interests on safeguarding peace of the Korean Peninsula.

**Elevating the independence of the Korean nation in the settlement of Peninsula issues**

Under the hardline policy of conservative governments in South Korea, inter-Korean relations have witnessed a downward spiral. Cooperation projects between the two sides, which the preceding progressive administrations had actively advanced, were successively terminated. Even the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a symbol of inter-Korean ties, was shut down. The bilateral relationship was at the edge of total breakup. The national reconciliation and cooperation process, which had been continuously promoted in the post-Cold War era, ran into difficulties, with the tendency of national partition becoming increasingly prominent. While South Korea’s conservative governments relied more closely on the alliance with the US in terms of security, and twice postponed takeover of wartime operational control, North Korea was actively strengthening security ties with China and Russia. The Cold War residuals on the Korean Peninsula showed signs of reemergence, and the principle of resolving problems independently by Koreans, once advocated by both the North and South, seemed more and

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18 The principle of resolving Korean Peninsula issues independently by Koreans had been established early in the inter-Korean joint statement on July 4, 1972, which advocated settling Peninsula issues “independently, peacefully, and in the spirit of national solidarity.” The multiple unification roadmaps proposed by South Korea afterwards all highlighted this principle. It was also enshrined in the various formal documents between North and South Korea including the June 2000 Joint Declaration.
more irrelevant. The situation contravened the progressives’ inherent belief.

Given this, the Moon Jae-in government put forward a well-timed strategy to promote peace on the Korean Peninsula: working actively to restart inter-Korean dialogues, enhancing national reconciliation and cooperation, strengthening common identity and bonds among Koreans, and making efforts to achieve North-South peaceful coexistence. The strategy aims at leading the denuclearization process on the Peninsula while improving inter-Korean relations, reducing external intervention and reliance on great powers, and ensuring the dominant position of the Korean nation as a whole in Peninsula affairs.

**Keeping a balance between inter-Korean relations and the alliance with the United States**

Under conservative administrations, the usual response of South Korea to the tensions on the Korean Peninsula was clinging to the US-ROK alliance and closely coordinating with the US, in order to ensure an overwhelming advantage over North Korea and control its impulse of using force. However, a strengthened alliance may easily lead to further reliance on it and undermine independence of South Korea, especially given the escalating intensity of the Peninsula situation. The Moon Jae-in government has adopted a different security strategy since taking office: stressing more the development and reinforcement of independent defense capabilities while underlining the role of alliance, to guarantee its dominance in settling Peninsula issues. In his speech on 2017 Liberation Day, Moon reiterated the position of independent resolution instead of solely depending on allies in security, and expressed the intent to strengthen the country’s own defense capabilities.\(^{19}\) Besides, the Moon government has restarted efforts to take back wartime operational control, to change institutionally the asymmetric hierarchical relationship between South Korea and the US in the alliance and build one that is equal and mutually beneficial instead. It is hoped that the

alliance would provide sufficient support on Korean Peninsula issues, but stop short of excessive intervention and disruption.

**Facilitating balanced development of relations with major powers**

The handling of major-power relations under conservative administrations demonstrated a clear pro-American leaning, and the relationship with China encountered major roadblocks. The Park Geun-hye government decided to deploy THAAD in support of the US, which resulted in a rapid deterioration of China-ROK relations and to some extent catalyzed the perpetuation of great-power confrontation in the region. The independence of South Korean foreign policy was further restrained. On the contrary, the Moon Jae-in administration intends to adjust the overly pro-US diplomatic position by actively developing ties with the four major powers of the US, China, Japan, and Russia, thus winning support and cooperation from neighboring countries on resolving Peninsula issues. Meanwhile, through the New Southern Policy and the New Northern Policy, the Moon government aims to expand multilateral cooperation and strengthen ties with countries in the region, thus building a “Northeast Asia plus” community of responsibility. By advancing economic diplomacy and strategic development cooperation, and stepping up response to trade protectionism, the Moon government is working to reduce South Korea’s following of US foreign policy, refrain from choosing sides between great powers like China and the US, and conduct its independent diplomacy based on national interests in the broader global arena.

**Soliciting South Korean people’s political support**

Amid anti-globalization sentiments, nationalism is notably on the rise, which is even more prominent in an ethnically homogenous country like South Korea. As its GDP per capita surpasses US$30,000, South Korea is witnessing surging independent awareness and national pride among its citizens. It is therefore a major strategic goal to elevate the country’s international standing, with the pursuit of middle-power status being a specific case. As mentioned above, South Korea was overly reliant on the
United States in terms of foreign policy and security under the Park Geun-hye administration, which not only pushed inter-Korean and China-ROK relations to a low point but also reinforced South Korea’s role as a US follower. This was far from the national glory and pride expected by the Korean people. In such a context, the Moon Jae-in government has proposed a diplomatic and security strategy aimed at increasing national independence. It helps win more domestic political support, which in turn serves as the underlying driving force of national independence.

**Effects of the Independent Strategy**

Since 2018, the situation on the Korean Peninsula has seen remarkable changes, to which the Moon Jae-in government’s independent strategy contributes a lot. This is demonstrated in the following aspects:

**Facilitating the easing of tensions on the Korean Peninsula**

Thanks to close interactions between China, the US and the two Koreas, the Trump administration no longer highlights force as a solution. Military exercises between US and South Korean forces were either conducted in a low-profile manner or postponed. North Korea has also adjusted its strategy, and in effect froze its nuclear and missile tests with no further aggressive moves. The situation on the Peninsula has walked from the edge of war in 2017 to relative stability, which is consistent with the objective pursued by Moon’s independent strategy. Therefore, the strategy has met its goal from South Korea’s perspective.

Regarding inter-Korean relations, the Moon government has taken the opportunity of the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang to reactivate the dialogue mechanism, including summit meetings, between the two sides based on the principle of mutual respect. This has led to significant improvement of bilateral ties, symbolized by the signing of the Panmunjom Declaration and the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018. In particular, the Agreement of the Implementation of the Historic
Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain, as a supplemental document of the Pyongyang Joint Declaration, was conducive to reducing military hostility and laying the foundation for mutual non-aggression and peaceful coexistence. It was also an institutional guarantee for the sustainable development of inter-Korean relations.

On the Korean Peninsula denuclearization issue, the Moon government has facilitated the reopening of DPRK-US nuclear negotiations by improving its ties with the North, thus breaking a decade-long deadlock. Through summit talks and multiple other communication channels, the Moon government has actively coordinated between North Korea and the US and contributed to the historic summit meeting between their leaders. The basic principles on complete denuclearization of the Peninsula and improving DPRK-US relations, established during the meeting, served as a guide to subsequent working-level consultations between the two sides. With decreasing hostility, a situation of de facto “dual suspension,” has materialized where the US and South Korea stop major military exercises in exchange for North Korea halting its weapons programs.

Contributing to progress in taking back wartime operational control and strengthening South Korea’s independent defense capabilities

Through frequent consultations between South Korea and the US, consensus in principle has been reached regarding the transfer of wartime operational control to Seoul. The two sides have agreed that the ROK/US Combined Forces Command would be headed by a four-star ROK Army general while the US military takes the deputy role. There have also been advances in implementation. Through command post exercises, South Korea has completed the first-stage evaluation on initial operational capability.\(^\text{20}\) At

\(^{20}\) According to the agreement between South Korea and the US, the ROK forces will be tested on their capabilities to command and control joint operations before taking back wartime operational control. To this end, exercises will be conducted by the Combined Forces Command, where the South Korean forces’ capacity to command will be evaluated in three stages, namely the initial operational capability (IOC), the full operational capability (FOC), and the full mission capability (FMC). If passing one stage every year, South Korea is expected to take back wartime operational control under Moon Jae-in’s administration.
the same time, the Moon government has significantly expanded the defense budget,\textsuperscript{21} purchasing new high-end weapons and equipment on a large scale to enhance independent defense capabilities in response to North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats.

**Fulfilling to some extent the objective of balancing relations with major powers**

As a gesture of goodwill to China, the Moon Jae-in government has made a “three-no promise”: no deploying additional THAAD systems, no participating in the US-led missile defense network, and no advancing multilateralization of alliances, which stops the continuous downturn of China-ROK relations. With subsequent close interactions between their leaders, defense ministers and other senior officials, China and South Korea have reached agreement on developing their strategic partnership, peacefully resolving the Korean Peninsula issues, and safeguarding the multilateral system. The restoration and progress of China-ROK ties helps South Korea keep a more balanced diplomatic stance between China and the US.

**Expanding South Korea’s diplomatic space**

While making efforts to advance balanced major-power relations, the Moon government has actively promoted multilateral diplomacy. In Northeast Asia, the China-Japan-ROK leaders’ meeting has been restarted with progress made in economics, trade and financial cooperation as well as sustainable development. Projects in various fields are underway under the auspices of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, which further institutionalizes cooperation among the three countries. Under the New Southern Policy that the Moon government fervently promotes, South Korea has been strengthening ties with Southeast and South Asian countries like Vietnam and India. This has created favorable conditions for South Korea’s

\textsuperscript{21} Moon Jae-in decides to raise the proportion of South Korea’s defense expenditure to GDP from 2.4 percent to 2.9 percent by the end of his term. In 2020, the defense spending has surpassed 50 trillion won (approximately US$50 billion).
adjustment of investment and industrial layout, and elevated the country’s international influence.

**Limitations of the Independent Strategy**

Moon Jae-in’s independent strategy is also faced with multiple domestic and international restraints, among which the United States is the most outstanding factor. The new changes in inter-Korean relations and South Korea’s domestic politics also interfere with the strategy’s implementation.

**US interference with the independent strategy**

The US factor has seriously affected the Moon government’s independent strategy. First, the US does not truly endorse or support South Korea’s “independent defense.” Looking from the actual evolution of ROK-US relations, the US has been imposing increasing security pressure to undermine South Korea’s determination to take back wartime operational control. On the one hand, it has been pressing South Korea on the issue of defense burden sharing. Since the Trump administration demanded South Korea pay five times its current amount for the cost of the US military presence in 2019, friction between the two countries has been made public, with emerging rhetoric of alliance breakup which has created mounting political pressure on the Moon Jae-in administration. On the other hand, Trump’s constant signaling of withdrawing the US military has further aggravated South Korea’s awareness of security crisis, which in turn compels South Korea to continue seeking protection from the US. This has also made it more difficult for the Moon government to take back wartime operational control, on which issue the US side has kept releasing negative signals.

While Moon is committed to regaining wartime operational control by the end of his term, the US government and military have stressed that the transfer should only take place on condition that the ROK military is able to effectively command and fend off North Korea’s nuclear threat. Obviously, the ambiguity of the condition makes it possible that the transfer may be
indefinitely postponed. Moreover, the US is seeking to strengthen the United Nations Command’s commanding role, even indicating that the Command would retain the role after wartime operational control is transferred to South Korea.22

Second, the US has seriously hindered South Korea’s efforts to lead denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Despite vocal support in principle for Moon’s Peninsula policy, the Trump administration does not want to see an inter-Korean relationship that goes ahead Washington’s expectations, let alone sitting by as South Korea pushes the limits. On the nuclear issue, the United State’ recalcitrance has left its negotiations with North Korea in an impasse, and made the Moon government’s ambition to serve as the driver in the process even more irrelevant. By linking the development of North Korea ties with the nuclear issue, the US does not allow South Korea to break through the sanctions framework and independently advance those representative inter-Korean exchange and cooperation projects. To prevent South Korea from crossing the line, the US has set up the US-ROK Working Group23 to coordinate the two countries’ respective relations with North Korea. Though Moon Jae-in has repeatedly underlined his commitment to independently developing inter-Korean cooperation projects since the beginning of 2020, the US has not yet given South Korea full rein. Harry Harris, US Ambassador to South Korea, bluntly stressed the US intention when saying that cooperation between South and North Korea should be “run through” the US-ROK Working Group.24 Last, the US has adopted a cautious and negative stance toward declaring an end to the Korean War. Without such a political declaration, the basic condition for establishing a new peace regime on the Korean Peninsula does not exist.

22 “US Emphasizes UNC’s Role in Crisis on the Korean Peninsula,” The Hankyoreh, September 16, 2019, p.14
23 Following the release of the Pyongyang Joint Declaration between South and North Korea in September 2018, the US-ROK Working Group was established. Its function is to coordinate on all outstanding problems regarding the Korean Peninsula situation, denuclearization, as well as US-DPRK and inter-Korean relations.
24 “Harris Warns against South Korea’s Proposal to Promote Individual Tourism,” JoongAng Ilbo, January 17, 2020, p.1.
Third, the US involvement has constituted a structural restraint on the independent diplomacy of South Korea. In recent years, the Moon Jae-in government has been facing mounting diplomatic pressure from Washington. Besides the tricky issue of defense burden sharing, the US has also put pressure on South Korea in multiple fields including the deployment of intermediate-range missiles, disputes with Japan, sending forces to the Strait of Hormuz, and economics and trade. The Moon government was ultimately forced to renegotiate the free trade agreement with the US. It also indirectly responded to the US demand of warship presence at Hormuz by expanding deployment of an anti-piracy military unit already operating in nearby areas. Regarding the disputes between South Korea and Japan, despite the Moon government’s hope for US mediation, there was no positive message from Washington. On the contrary, tremendous pressure from the US on the General Security of Military Information Agreement between South Korea and Japan forced Seoul to agree on an extension of the intelligence-sharing pact.

**Instability of inter-Korean relations**

Apart from the US factor, the instability of inter-Korean relations has also disrupted the Moon government’s implementation of the independent strategy. As Moon was unable to make breakthroughs in exchanges with North Korea due to US intervention, the previously reached agreements on deepening inter-Korean economic cooperation was unlikely to be put into practice, which resulted in North Korea’s increasingly harsh criticism of the South such as begging external forces for support and cooperation. As an expression of dissatisfaction with Moon’s progress on enhancing inter-Korean relations, the North unilaterally removed the remaining South Korean facilities in its Mount Kumgang tourist resort, cut off communication between authorities of the two sides, and then blew up the joint liaison office in the Kaesong Industrial Complex on June 9, 2020. The North’s claim to make further military moves has reignited the tension on the Peninsula. With enormous pressure on his North Korea policy, Moon Jae-in is losing
momentum in his push for an independent strategy based on inter-Korean rapprochement.

Obstruction of domestic conservatives

The obstruction of domestic conservatives, who keep criticizing Moon Jae-in’s North Korea policy as “begging for dialogue” and “winning time for the North to complete nuclear weapon development,” has hindered Moon’s independent strategy to some extent. Conservatives strongly opposes Moon’s attempt to restart the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the Mount Kumgang tourist project, and mostly views inter-Korean relations unfavorably. On the nuclear issue, the South Korean conservatives still stick to the hardline approach, and advocate NATO-style sharing of tactical nuclear weapons with the US or even independently developing nuclear weapons. With conservatives standing in the way, it is difficult to amass sufficient domestic support for an independent strategy.

Policy Outlook

As Moon Jae-in’s presidential term enters the second half, positive implications of an independent strategy have generally emerged for Korean Peninsula issues, the US-ROK alliance, and the Northeast Asian situation. Barring sudden changes, the Moon government will further the strategy along the established path.

Regarding issues on the Korean Peninsula, the Moon Jae-in government is expected to continue adopting progressive political doctrines and maximize inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation. At the same time, it will consolidate the hard-won outcomes in bilateral relations and spare no effort to promote denuclearization and a peace regime on the Peninsula, while elevating the status of the Korean nation in Peninsula affairs. All this will create favorable conditions for extending Democratic Party rule. The proactiveness in a stabilizing situation on the Peninsula and improving inter-Korean relations, coupled with significant achievements in preventing
and controlling the COVID-19 pandemic, have greatly boosted the Korean people's self-respect and sense of honor. The sentiment has led to high approval rating of Moon Jae-in and the Democratic Party’s dominance in domestic politics when combined with the nationalist mood motivated by external repression. Therefore, even solely out of domestic political concerns, the Moon Jae-in government will continue working to ensure stability on the Peninsula and deliver substantial results. Moreover, the proactive engagement policy will help maintain overall stability of inter-Korean relations and the situation on the Peninsula.

25 The approval rating of President Moon Jae-in once surpassed 80 percent following the Panmunjom Declaration on April 27, 2018. Despite declining support due to stalemate in nuclear talks and weakening momentum of inter-Korean ties, Moon’s approval rating witnessed another surge and exceeded 60 percent because of the government’s successful control of COVID-19 pandemic. In the National Assembly election on April 15, 2020, Moon’s Democratic Party overwhelmingly won 180 of the 300 seats.
Unfortunately, the US has reined in the progress of South Korea's policy toward the North through the US-ROK Working Group, making it unlikely for inter-Korean relations to achieve in-depth positive development. As the South Korean approach has demonstrated increasing logical contradictions because this approach leads Peninsula affairs by close coordination within the alliance, it is all the more necessary to enhance the country's independence of action. While North Korea escalates its censure and pressure, criticism against the US-ROK Working Group has also been on the rise in South Korea. In this context, Moon Jae-in has substantially reshuffled his diplomatic and security team, and made efforts to improve the Working Group's operation, even attempting to facilitate a new US-DPRK summit meeting.

Even so, how much room the US is willing to give South Korea can have crucial implications for future development of inter-Korean relations. While Trump is not expected to unilaterally shut down the door for dialogue with Pyongyang, the US position on North Korea is also unlikely to witness a big change. The Moon government may make more efforts to enhance ties with the North, but it must handle such challenges as keeping a balance between independent choice and US restraints, and properly addressing pressure from Pyongyang. A strong political will and superb diplomatic skills are necessary to resolve the problems.

The US-ROK alliance has entered a key period of adjustment. As the fundamental solution to changing the alliance's transactional nature and asymmetry between security and independence, the Moon government's moves to take back wartime operational control and develop independent defense will inevitably impact the US-led alliance strategy, and cause dispute and friction in US-ROK relations. The Trump administration's blackmail approach on the issue of defense burden sharing and other self-centered unilateralist actions have stirred up the nationalist sentiment in South Korea, which becomes a driving force for the country to pursue further independence. The result of the April 2020 National Assembly election is not unrelated to the domestic mood.
In the future, Moon Jae-in will continue to aim for taking back wartime operational control within his term, and more resolutely advance the independent strategy while developing an equal and mutually beneficial alliance. The US-ROK alliance is likely to encounter more challenges: apart from the defense burden sharing issue, disputes between the two countries may also emerge from the US request for South Korea to step up deployment of missile defense systems, accelerate multilateral outreach of the alliance, and participate in the US Indo-Pacific strategy. However, the alliance is unlikely to collapse, as what the Moon government pursues is an equal and reciprocal alliance with the US instead of a breakup. Given that the nuclear issue will persist for a long time, maintaining a stable alliance with the US is still a major security priority for South Korea.

Regarding the independent foreign policy, the Moon government will continue to enhance balanced major-power relations and multilateral diplomacy. During the rest of his term, Moon Jae-in is expected to maintain the “three-no promise” framework in the relationship with China, to ensure a relatively balanced power structure in Northeast Asia. This is not only conducive to South Korea’s diplomatic autonomy and independence, but also serves the country’s national interests by leveraging Chinese influence to facilitate the resolution of Korean Peninsula issues. On multilateral occasions, the Moon government will continue actively advancing the New Southern Policy and the New Northern Policy. The efforts will help alleviate South Korea’s pressure from Trump’s unilateral moves, and strengthen exchanges and cooperation within the region and among the various sub-regions, thus contributing to the multilateral world order. All this will serve to expand South Korea’s diplomatic space and elevate its autonomy and independence in foreign policy.

Amid the intensifying strategic competition between China and the United States, the US factor will pose even more prominent restraints on South Korea’s foreign policy. By adhering to the “three-no promise,” the Moon government saved the China-ROK relationship to some degree. However, the US is expected to continue imposing pressure on South Korea
in areas related to the “three noes” by steering the evolution of the Korean Peninsula situation. It may push South Korea to support the upgrade of THAAD, advance the deployment of intermediate missiles, and deepen US-Japan-ROK trilateral security cooperation, to all of which China is highly alert. In multilateral diplomacy, Moon’s landmark New Southern Policy has also met with US interference. In the future, the US may wield multiple leverages, including but not limited to the expansion of G7 membership, to induce South Korea into its Indo-Pacific strategy. Moon’s pursuit of independence through multilateral diplomacy will still be subject to the US-designed framework of great-power competition.

**Conclusion**

Independence is an essential attribute of a modern nation-state. From a long-term perspective, sufficient independence is needed by South Korea both to resolve Korean Peninsula issues and to safeguard peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Given the special nature of the US-ROK alliance and the complexity of South Korean domestic politics, there is still a long way to go before true independence is achieved, which relies on a clear path forward and a resolute strategic determination. The process will feature the changing dynamics between South Korea’s security needs and its independence pursuit. It will also witness the transformation of US-ROK alliance from an asymmetric status to an equal and reciprocal relationship. While South Korea will not stop its quest for national independence, its alliance with the US is also set to face more challenges, with dispute and friction bound to arise between the two sides. For all this, the alliance will not simply collapse; instead, it will probably last for a long time. How to fulfill national independence in foreign policy and security while maintaining the alliance is a test of the political vision and strategic resolve of South Korean politicians.