

At The 16th World Knowledge Forum

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On October 20-22, I had an opportunity to participate in the 16th World Knowledge Forum (WKF) in Seoul. The WKF was established in Seoul in 2000 for an annual meeting. Sponsored by South Korean media group Maeil Broadcasting Network (MBN), the forum has annually met for high-level discussion on the hottest issues regarding the international and East Asian situations. At the 16th WKF meeting, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, former U.S. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, former U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, Prof. Paul Kennedy, Prof. John Mearsheimer and other famed people had vigorous discussions on key issues regarding international politics, the world economy and geopolitics in various sessions. The Forum organizer estimated the number of registered participants at about 3,500, indicating a very large conference.

The unified theme for the latest conference was "Mapping the Zeitgeist," covering key problems facing today's world and their background including perceptions and views of the world. Specifically, participants discussed U.S.-China relations, challenges for Asia Pacific stability and prosperity, Middle Eastern problems, Russian problems, global economic outlooks and other topics. The Forum also included five sessions on energy and environment problems, indicating that crude oil prices and other energy problems are recognized as key problems influencing the world.

The conference was very interesting in that it included not only sessions on international politics, the world economy and other issues seen from a macro point of view but also those in which famed experts and company officials discussed robots, automatic driving and other cutting-edge technologies that would support or change the world in the future, from the business point of view. But my impression through discussions in the Forum is that the most important matter of concern to South Korean participants, dominant in the Forum hosted in their country, is the fate of South Korea's relations with the United States and China, and U.S.-China relations. At many sessions, the famed experts cited above discussed the present situation and future perspectives of U.S.-China relations and South Korea's relevant position. These discussions were very interesting to me.

Will a rising China outdo the United States in total national power in the future? How will China challenge the United States in that process? What grand strategy will the United States build and implement in the face of a fast catch-up by China? These questions are the most important problems influencing future developments for not only South Korea but also Japan and the entire

world. A U.S. expert noted that China would naturally use its accumulated power to challenge and rewrite U.S.-led international orders and rules while the United States would exploit all possible means to counter the Chinese challenge. Even while the United States and China grow more dependent on each other in the economic arena, their confrontation over order and rules will be natural in a sense. The confrontation might have caused the revival of geopolitics. Many participants in the Forum cited alliance and cooperation as part of the most important keywords for the United States under the situation. In this respect, the United States gives priority to its alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Australia and India. Representing their economic cooperation is the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade agreement.

Impressively, South Korean participants based many of their remarks and questions on the problem of how their country should act while being sandwiched between the United States as its security ally and China that has been historically and geographically close to South Korea and has risen and become the most important economic partner for South Korea. It was very interesting that many U.S. experts clarified their hope to see South Korea, or a possible unified Korea, choosing the alliance with the United States that has served as the base for South Korea's prosperity. They also noted that South Korea shares values with the United States.

Regarding alliances, I would like to point out that conference participants frequently discussed Japan's roles in addressing Northeast Asian or Asia-Pacific problems and the United States' consciousness of these roles. It was noteworthy that these participants indicated their strong interests in Japan's relations with the United States and China, national security policy developments in Japan, and the Japanese economy and the fate of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Abenomics economic policy. While it may be the most important for South Korea to consider relations with the United States and China, how it should deal with Japan may be a key issue for South Korea in considering the relations with the two big powers.

Forum participants also had vigorous discussions on future geopolitical risks regarding the international situation including Middle Eastern problems as well as Russian problems and Russia's relations with the United States and China as external factors influencing U.S.-China relations. As U.S.-Russia relations have grown severer over Russia's aerial bombing in Syria, a strategic alliance and a sensitive balance between China and Russia have become important for considering international politics and order. As the world economy's integration makes progress with major countries growing more dependent on each other, geopolitical disputes may have direct economic impacts. In a new development based on various complex and sensitive international balances, Chinese President Xi Jinping has visited the United Kingdom and emphasized the enhancement of China-U.K. economic cooperation.

In a session where I participated, Japanese, Chinese, South Korean and Russian participants held panel discussions on energy problems, including conventional energy sources' competition with unconventional ones, in an effort to enhance cooperation between their countries. The present loose energy supply-demand balance have resulted in creating "winners and losers",

their positions may be reversed if and when the loose supply-demand balance leads to a future tightening and price hikes. How to exploit Russian energy resources while considering US relations has become a major challenge for Northeast Asia that will begin to import liquefied natural gas from the United States in the future. Each Northeast Asian country in the future will be required to strategically consider the challenge based on a wide view of the world and the “Zeitgeist (spirit of the age).”

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