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KOREA-US ALLIANCE UNDERCUT BY MISCONCEPTIONS FORUM

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WASHINGTON, May 1 (Yonhap) -- Both South Korea and the U.S. have an interest in maintaining their alliance, and any problems come not from a change in this premise but more from misperceptions and missteps, scholars and experts said Monday.

North Korea's nuclear issue, Korea's worsening relations with Japan, and the generational changes in South Korea were commonly named as challenges to the alliance by panelists on the opening day of the Korea-U.S. Forum, co-hosted by Washington's Brookings Institution and Seoul's Sejong Institute.

Michael Green, former Asia director at the White House National Security Council, said the alliance has a bright future in terms of national interest.

"But in terms of political culture, strategic culture, constructed identity, we have a lot of strains we need to come to terms with," he said.

Persistent fear among South Koreans about a possible U.S. military strike against North Korea is one of the misconceptions, a "mythology" that dates back to the first nuclear crisis of the early 1990s, according to Green.

The Clinton administration is said to have contemplated a strike on North Korean nuclear facilities, averted when former U.S. President Jimmy Carter went into Pyongyang and met then-top leader Kim Il-sung.

"The assumption is that if diplomacy fails this time, if the U.S. doesn't engage North Korea in a similar way, the results would be a failure of diplomacy," the former White House staffer told the forum.

"The Iraq example fuels this." Green said the Clinton government may have drawn up a military plan on North Korea but that does not mean it was ready to follow through.

"There is no evidence at all that the Bush administration has plans to attack North Korea," he said.

South Korea's history dispute with Japan is also a source of divergence between Seoul and Washington, with the former not understanding the possible backlash of U.S.

intervention, said Green.

Seoul-Tokyo tension had escalated over ownership of Dokdo, an islet situated between them but effectively controlled by the South Korean side.

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's repeated controversial visits to Yasukuni shrine, honoring war criminals from World War II, are also a source of animosity between the two countries.

"Some Korean scholars and officials have urged the United States to press Japan to change its policies," Green said. "Pressure from the U.S. side will cause a backlash within Japan that will make this issue harder, not easier, for the next prime minister to resolve." Moon Chung-in, a professor at South Korea's Yonsei University, compared the Seoul-Washington alliance to the law of thermodynamics, arguing that it is harder to keep the relations at the same energy level than to reach it.

Both Seoul and Washington have no option but to maintain the alliance, he said.

"Suppose you abandon South Korea. What can be your option?" he asked.

South Korea could then side with China, and the U.S. could bolster relations with Japan, he said, "but a strong and powerful Japan may cause another threat to the U.S." The professor addressed the need to recognize each other's views, including approaches to the North Korean human rights situation.

"We value peace with North Korea more than human rights," Moon acknowledged. "That is our geopolitical destiny." "Let us come up with collective wisdom with patience," he said. "Let us work from within." Park Kun-young, a professor at Catholic University of Korea, argued that South Koreans feel slighted when they see how the U.S. favors Japan.

"The U.S. is callous to, or (shows) lack of respect for, South Korea's interest," he said. "This is contrasted with Japan." Donald Gregg, former U.S. ambassador to South Korea and now president of the Korea Society, emphasized the urgency for Seoul and Washington to redefine their alliance.

The Korea Society late last year held an off-the-record session on the alliance, of which summaries and recommendations were sent only to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon.

All the participants agreed that a new agenda needs to be jointly developed, Gregg said.

"There was unanimous recognition of the fact that current complexity blocking progress in North Korean weapons problems did not block immediate efforts to redefine the alliance," he said.

(THROUGH ASIA PULSE)