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Changes under the Participatory Government in the First Year: (2) Diplomacy and National Security

Simultaneous Strengthening of the ROK-U.S. Alliance and Laying a Foundation for New National Defense

The first year of President Roh Moo-hyun’s Participatory Government was one that required a leader with fortitude of character.

The Administration was inaugurated at a time when the North Korean nuclear problem had reared its ugly head again. Pyongyang’s nuclear program has constituted the most dangerous threat to peace on the Korean Peninsula. It is also a major element hindering peace and stability in the whole of Northeast Asia. The new Administration was taking its first steps on the crossroad that would determine peace or another war just as North Korea and the United States began to engage in arm wrestling over the nuclear issue. In the midst of this, the United States was reported to be mulling over the relocation of its troops in Korea and the USFK headquarters in Yongsan, worrying many people about a possible weakening of the bilateral alliance. Additionally, the heated debate on whether to dispatch Korean troops to Iraq and other national security issues weighed heavily on the shoulders of the new Administration.

It is fortunate indeed that the Administration was able to overcome these challenges one by one. As a result of extraordinary effort, it was able to consolidate its basic policies for (1) balanced, practical diplomacy, (2) cooperative, more self-reliant national defense and (3) peace and prosperity in the region.
The Government’s balanced, practical diplomacy seeks a balance between national interests and the values the Republic holds dear. It also pursues a balance between its bilateral alliance and multilateral security cooperation. When these balances are maintained through flexible strategies, the country’s diplomacy can be characterized as balanced and practical.

Cooperative, more self-reliant national defense means equipping the nation with sufficient military strength to deter the North on our own while actively utilizing the ROK-U.S. alliance and multinational security cooperation. The policy pursues simultaneous development of the nation’s independent defense capabilities and the bilateral alliance with the United States.

In the past year, owing to these defense policies, the country was able to eliminate the danger of another war and instead enhance the environment for peace on the peninsula. Also, the ROK-U.S. alliance, which seemed to be precarious for a while, has been strengthened more than ever before just as dry cracked land became firm and solid after a rain.

Improvement was made in matters concerning the National Security Council (NSC) and relations with the North. The NSC secretariat has been reorganized and expanded to facilitate planning, information sharing and coordination between pertinent government agencies. National security-related ministries and agencies held 39 working-level coordination meetings and 33 security evaluation meetings. Over the past year, the NSC Standing Committee meetings were called 27 times and security-related ministers met 11 times, making a total of 110 such meetings. President Roh personally presided over the NSC on two occasions and emphasized the importance of close policy coordination and active exchanges of ideas among government agencies.

Despite the difficult situation stemming from Pyongyang’s nuclear project, the South and North are continuing meaningful dialogue.

In the past year, the two sides held 38 meetings, a monthly average of three, and spent a total of 106 days discussing diverse pending issues. Inter-Korean Ministerial Talks were held four times, working-level military talks eight times, South-North Economic Cooperation Committee meetings
four times and various other working-level committee meetings 13 times. Consequently, the two sides were able to complete the South-North railway reconnection work, launch the construction of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and enabled tourists to Kumgangsan (the Diamond Mountains) to use a newly inaugurated land route linking the South and the famous travel destination in the North.

The results of the 13th Inter-Korean Ministerial Talks that closed on February 6 were substantial. The two sides agreed to cooperate to help make the upcoming second round of the Six-Party Talks in Beijing on the North Korean nuclear issue successful. They also agreed to hold military talks “as early as possible” to reduce tensions on the peninsula.

Another improvement in connection with South-North issues is diverse Government measures aimed at enhancing the transparency of the Government’s formulation and implementation of North Korea policies. Inter-Korea trade during the one-year period has increased to US$724 million, and 16,303 visitors crossed the border. A total of 2,619 members of dispersed families met each other, and the two sides decided to establish a permanent meeting place for family reunions.

Before acting on the proposal to dispatch Korean troops to Iraq, the Government sent fact-finding teams to Iraq in an effort to approach the proposal based on fact and with caution. Considering that the heated pro and con debates could hamper national unity and because of the importance of the issue, the Government tried to hear a broad range of views. Eventually, the Government decided to participate in the international effort to bring about peace in Iraq at an early date and determined an optimum number of troops to be sent there. In the process, the Government was able to persuade many people who were opposed to the dispatch. Through the experience of coordinating opposing views on security and other international issues, the Administration has developed fortitude and conviction that important and controversial policies can be carried out without damaging the national consensus.

In the course of dealing with tough issues, the Administration was able to nurture its own capacity for more effective diplomacy and national security.