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The Dangerous Nature of America First

By KAWAMURA Hiroshi

Since the election campaign, President Donald Trump has been stressing the foreign policy key word of "America First," which raises critical concerns among American allies, while Russia and China are exploring more vigorously to overturn Western supremacy, and Iran and North Korea are testing the new administration in Washington. Some people believe naively that there is no problem for any nation state to give priorities to her own people and national interests. Things are not so simple, and we should never dismiss the dangerous and caustic nature of this ideology. First of all, Trump understands US foreign policy so poorly that he falls into believing in selfish and defensive views of the world. As a Jewish immigrant from the old Soviet Union in the childhood, Max Boot criticizes Trump's bigoted zero-sum perspectives. Notably, Trump sees that America has been so altruistic that her trade partners have exploited the working class in the Rust Belt. To the contrary, it is universally understood that American help to reconstruct her former enemies to become friendly trade partners and allies is a successful landmark of her foreign policy. It is quite worrisome that Trump does not evaluate highly of American ideals, including human rights, and that is bitterly criticized by European allies and international NGOs. Actually, human rights advocacy has weakened American enemies such as the Soviet Union, and bolstered American power, through promoting democracy and freedom. An immigrant from the Soviet Union like Boot is well much more aware of it than Trump.

Meanwhile, far right nationalists in Europe and Japan are emotionally empathetic to Trump's vision, though it hurts national security interests of their countries. This is because such self-assumed grassroots patriots detest globalist elites, and they want bullying Trump to defeat cosmopolitan ruling class. It is White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon, who provides the philosophical foundation for Trump's America First. Professor Daniel Kreiss at the University of North Carolina points out that the pillars of Bannon's idea are economic nationalism and antipathy to corporatist global elites. In Bannon's view, the world is inherently an arena of nation state competition. From this point of view, he believes that trade, immigration, and multilateral cooperation erodes national sovereignty and identity. Instead of universalism that modern enlightenment advocates, Bannon understands international politics in terms of the Clash of Civilization, and sees Islam inherently belligerent.

Since Trump suggested abolishing alliances with Europe and Japan, his foreign policy is commonly seen isolationism. However, Kreiss insists that Bannon's thoughts are essentially nationalism, and that does not hesitate foreign intervention, only to maximize national interests in a ruthlessly competitive world. Unlike neoconservatives' regime change, Trump's intervention is not based on such a universal ideal but sporadic recognition of international affairs. Trump is unpredictable not just because of his temperament, but because of Bannon's ideology. Elliot Cohen and his proponents are right to denounce Trump's swing from disengagement to belligerent adventurism in the open letter. In view of Bannon's influence on Trump like this, so called flattery diplomacy by major power leaders notably British Prime Minister Theresa May and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is no guarantee to develop stable relations with the new administration.

Max Boot argues that such hatred against rootless cosmopolitan simulates xenophobia and anti-Semitism, which is closely associated with undemocratic nationalists like Josef Stalin and Charles Lindbergh. In resonance with the alt-right in the United States, a Russian neo-Eurasianist Alexander Dugin is exploring to seize the opportunity to work with the Trump administration to repeal the current liberal world order, while expanding Russian influence from Ukraine to the Middle East, including Turkey, Iran, and Syria. America First is the ideology of dissolving the Western democratic alliance. There is no wonder why Trump and Putin are so closely entangled, and Bannon's anti-globalism charms nativists in Europe and Japan so much. The danger of America First is too critical to dismiss.

(This is the English translation of an article written by KAWAMURA Hiroshi, Foreign Policy Watcher, which originally appeared on the e-forum "Hyakka-Seiho (Hundred Flowers in Full Bloom)" of JFIR on March 1, 2017.)