



Inside-out & Outside-in of the Korea-U.S. FTA

Bae Chul-Soo's Illumination & Insight on Communication Content

Background of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement

The Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) has been actively negotiated for the past two years. However, it is in reality an extension of the long history of trade negotiations between the two countries. A good understanding of the history of the FTA is vital to the development of related steps toward creating economic benefits not just for Korea but also for the U.S. The FTA is not an end in itself but a tool for mutual benefit. Looking back, this reporter first wrote about an FTA between Korea and the United States on November 6, 1984, in an article entitled "U.S. Bids Free-Trade Accord with Korea." The U.S. proposal for an FTA at this point was part of its external trade strategies to maintain the dominion of "Great America," along with Section 301 of the U.S. Trade Act, promotion of the WTO system, etc.

Global Standard: A Twin to U.S. Rules

The present KORUS FTA is widely viewed as a practical tool to enhance trade relations via tariff reductions and the lowering of non-tariff barriers. Behind the pact is the fundamental concept that the world should travel the path of global standards. However, the de facto author of global standards is the United States. From this perspective, it is not surprising that American trade negotiators have consistently emphasized the adoption of global standards. Meanwhile, the real power behind the push for global standards are U.S.-based multinational companies, which have a network of connections and influence with U.S. legislators and administration officials.

Leverage Against China

In the 1970s and 80s, the United States struggled to defend its leadership of the global economy against a stiff Japanese challenge. Now China is emerging as the most formidable threat to U.S. economic dominance. The KORUS FTA is one of the basic U.S. strategies in dealing with competition from China, seeing in Korea a valuable partner in the booming East Asian economy. The bilateral trade agreement could provide for greater U.S. access to East Asian markets and creates new opportunities for American businesses. At the same time, Korea can capitalize on its geographical position and other advantages as a hub of Northeast Asia.

However, to do this, it has to be mindful of its triangular relationship with Japan, China and the United States.

Korean Content is One Thing, English is Another

Communication has been critical to the advance of human civilization throughout history. In attempting to write a new chapter in history with the Korea-U.S. FTA, Koreans face a decided communication barrier, more specifically an English language barrier. Going “all-out” to learn English means losing time in the study of other important and critical subjects. Furthermore, due to differences in practices and culture, the direct translation of Korean press materials into English many times results in a loss of meaning and misunderstandings.

For example, during the recent FTA negotiations, Korean government officials publicized the potential benefits of the trade deal for domestic purposes. Their published comments were literally translated into English as “only praise for the FTA.” A Korean press release is one thing and an English press release is quite another.

Korea’s Challenge in the Era of Googlization

The theme of the 2006 Davos Forum was that the era of globalization is evolving into the era of googlization. Google is recognized as one of the most influential phenomena in the global economy today. Google’s advance should be understood not only from its successful development of hardware-oriented computer technology but also from its sophisticated culture-related software approach. This has serious consequences for Korea because of the significant distortions of Korean-language content associated with Google’s automated translation of search results. Lost in translation has taken on a whole new meaning, subjecting Korean content, and consequently its image, to sometimes misleading, nonsensical and inaccurate translations.

English Content Standardization Strategy

With the inevitability of globalization and the arrival of the FTA era, voices proposing that English be adopted as the nation’s official language are growing louder. But this is not a practical solution. All Korean schoolchildren already receive English education from an early age. But even with this familiarity with the language, they remain woefully incapable of developing adequate English content. Communication content is the fusion of language capability, knowledge and experience. Therefore, Korea must emphasize the skill to develop communication content rather than just language capability. In this regard, it is desirable that the

government establish a Board of English Content Standardization (BECS) to be responsible for devising solutions to English language barriers in the FTA era.

Beyond Knowledge: A Wisdom Kingdom

As urged in the foregoing discussion, change is necessary to overcome the English-language bottleneck to achieving full integration into the global village. The current language disadvantage can be used as momentum to realize Korea's potential to join the leading countries of the world by turning the language barrier into a cultural movement with the goal of creating a wisdom kingdom.

Some 200 years ago, King Chongchong led the Korean version of a cultural renaissance, based on the spirit of "ongojisin" (溫故知新), learning from history and creating a new future, which is similar in concept to value networking in today's digital era. "ongojisin" was facilitated by the establishment of Kyujang-gak, a history and policy research center, which today is the library of Seoul National University. We need to learn from the pages of history in establishing BECS as a data and research center along the lines of the Kyujang-gak. This body would be part of a comprehensive content-oriented policy to develop the communication content industry into a next-generation growth engine in the age of the Korea-U.S. FTA. The communication content industry would generate an enormous number of job opportunities as a knowledge industry that combines language capability, writing skills, related experience, knowledge, information, etc. This new industry would provide the means to overcome language barriers, build a patented Korean wisdom kingdom and surpass the U.S.-originated knowledge society.

Leadership Tailored to Need in the FTA Era

In Korea's modern history, national leaders have been elected to address the dominant issue of the time - Korea's presidents in recent years have championed freedom fighters, democracy and the Internet. The next cause could very well be free trade agreements. The individual elected to be Korea's president in 2008 should be capable of utilizing FTAs to build Korea into a wisdom kingdom. He or she should take on the mission of reviving King Chongchong's ongojisin, maintaining the spirit of President Roh Moo-hyun's innovation spirit, updating Park Chung-Hee's outward-looking policy, reprising King Sejong's creativity and benchmarking King Kwagato, who oversaw the expansion of Korea's kingdom to an area larger than China today.