

Sept. 2021



上海國際問題研究院  
SHANGHAI INSTITUTES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

# **Biden's Korean Peninsula Policy** *A Preview*

**Project Co-directors**

**WU Chunsi**

**GONG Keyu**

**Contributing Authors**

**XUE Chen**

**LI Ning**

**Biden's Korean Peninsula Policy**  
*A Preview*

Task Force on Korean Peninsula Policy  
Shanghai Institutes for International Studies  
September 2021

## About SIIS

Founded in 1960, the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS) is a government-affiliated high-caliber think tank dedicated to informing government decision-making by conducting policy-oriented studies in world politics, economics, foreign policy, and international security. SIIS maintains intensive and extensive exchanges and cooperation with research institutions at home and abroad, bolstering China's international influence and soft power.

SIIS boasts an authorized size of 106 full-time research fellows and staff, including 60% senior fellows. SIIS was ranked one of the top ten Chinese think tanks in 2006, and one of the top ten global think tanks (non-American) in 2008. SIIS comprises six institutes and six research centers, namely, the institute for global governance studies, the institute for foreign policy studies, the institute for world economic studies, the institute for international strategic studies, the institute for comparative politics and public policy, the institute for Taiwan, Hong Kong & Macao Studies, the center for American studies, the center for Asia-Pacific Studies, the center for Russian and Central Asian Studies, the center for West Asia and Africa studies, the center for European studies, and the center for maritime and polar studies. SIIS has also set up six in-house research platforms, i.e., the research base on people's diplomacy of Shanghai, center for the study of Chinese diplomatic theory and practice, center for world politics and political parties, center for China-South Asia cooperation, center for BRI and Shanghai studies, and center for international cyber governance. In addition, SIIS is an institutional member of the Shanghai International Strategic Studies Association and the Shanghai International Relations Association.

*Global Review* (bimonthly, Chinese) and the *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* are the two flagship journals of SIIS and have become a prestigious academic platform for domestic and international scholarship.

## Taskforce Introduction

### *Project Co-directors*

**WU Chunsi**, Director, Institute for International Strategic Studies, SIIS

**GONG Keyu**, Deputy Director, Center for Asia-Pacific Studies, SIIS

### *Contributing Authors*

**XUE Chen**, Research Fellow, Institute for International Strategic Studies, SIIS

**LI Ning**, Research Fellow, Institute for Global Governance Studies, SIIS

### *Translators*

**LI Xin**, Managing Editor, *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies (CQISS)*, SIIS

**YANG Li**, Deputy Editor-in-Chief, *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies (CQISS)*,  
SIIS

**SUN Shasha**, Department of International Exchanges & *China Quarterly of International  
Strategic Studies (CQISS)*, SIIS

**XU Xiaolan**, Department of International Exchanges, SIIS

## **Authors' Remarks**

The Biden administration has completed its Korean Peninsula policy review on April 30, 2021. Though details of the policy remain unknown to the public, actions have been rolled out already.

This report was released in its Chinese version in early April this year, but most of its insights still apply in the current context. As the Biden administration continues to shift the focus of the U.S. foreign policy eastward, this report is now published again in English with some minor adjustments in the footnote as a follow-up to our observation and study of the Korean Peninsula.

SIIS Task Force

September , 2021

## Contents

Summary .....	1
Old Problem, New Approach .....	3
Biden's DPRK Policy: A Preview .....	10
The ROK Factor .....	16
The Peninsula amid Great Power Competition .....	21



## Summary

Since the Biden administration took office, its approach and strategy for domestic and foreign affairs have become the focus of global attention. The new administration's policy toward the Korean Peninsula is one of the most heatedly debated subjects among policymakers and pundits. After three summit meetings between the U.S. and DPRK leaders during the Trump administration, should we expect major diplomatic proposals, initiatives, or events on President Biden's watch? Indeed, the past four years have seen major changes in regional security architecture, the most noticeable of which are dynamics on the Korean Peninsula and intensified China-U.S. strategic rivalry. In this context, a comprehensive overhaul of Mr. Trump's approach to global affairs is expected under a Democratic administration staffed with foreign policy veterans, and the Korean Peninsula policy will be among the most consequential decisions for Biden's White House.

**As generally believed, it will take four to six months for the Biden team to conduct a thorough policy review and put its own stamp on Washington's priorities vis-à-vis Pyongyang. Biden's new approach to the Peninsula will be informed by Washington's assessment of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile capabilities and influenced by the timing and way of early, if any, diplomatic contacts.**

U.S. strategic posture toward DPRK and the extent of policy change on Biden's watch will be defined by the answers to the following key questions.

1. How does the Biden administration perceive and prioritize the strategic urgency of nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula?
2. What is the operational method of Team Biden's Korea(s) diplomacy and how different is it from that of President Trump?
3. What is the overall tenor of Biden's DPRK policy and how will Pyongyang react as it awaits and evaluates the Biden administration's policy review?
4. How much strategic weight will Washington's Asian allies carry as President Biden renews emphasis on policy coordination and consultation with Tokyo and Seoul, and what is the prospect of the U.S.-ROK alliance?
5. How does the growing China-U.S. competition factor into the formulation and implementation of Biden's Korean Peninsula strategy?

**In an effort to delineate the contours of President Biden's Korean Peninsula policy, the task force at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS) previews Team Biden's words and writings on the campaign trail and the administration's early expressions, therefrom making the following observations.**

**1. Preoccupied with pressing domestic priorities, the Biden administration has put the Korean Peninsula agenda on the back burner.** But the real and growing sense of urgency in the face of multitudes of challenges both at home and abroad is accelerating the normal policy process.

**2. President Biden's policy toward Pyongyang will be substantially different from Trump's approach.** A bottom-up, incremental model is likely to replace Trump's person-to-person diplomacy marked by flashy summit meetings and "love letters."

**3. Existing sanctions will be maintained until the Biden administration sees substantive results regarding the North's nuclear and missile arsenal.** While keeping up the pressure to coerce Pyongyang back to the negotiating table, President Biden is expected to respond more proactively to the DPRK Leader Kim Jong Un's overtures and place a high premium on policy reciprocity.

**4. Having declared that America is back, the Biden team will elevate the role of Seoul and Tokyo in its strategic planning and increase trilateral coordination and consultation.** But the four years of Trump's "America First" policy have left the two East Asian allies even more skeptical about Washington's reliability, complicating Biden's alliance-mending efforts as divergences of interests and policy goals between Tokyo and Seoul continue to grow.

**5. Stiff competition is more likely to hinder China-U.S. coordination on the Peninsula.** The tone, substance, and results of diplomatic engagement between Beijing and Washington over the nuclear issue in the early days of the new administration will give a foretaste of what could ensue on the Peninsula. Positive initial interactions may generate broader implications for China-U.S. relations, regional stability, and global security at large.



## Old Problem, New Approach

The Biden administration is expected to maintain some elements of its predecessor's approach to Pyongyang while recalibrating others where it deems necessary, urgent, and possible.

### What remains constant?

For over two decades since 1994 when the Agreed Framework was signed, Washington has pursued three major policy responses to Pyongyang's growing nuclear capability. The first response is regime change by military force. The second one is called "strategic patience" or "ruthless dismissal." The third one is proactive engagement and dialogue. Washington has, over the years, "tried diplomatic engagement, humanitarian assistance, security guarantees, sanctions relaxation, summit meetings, and reducing allied military deterrent, but all to no avail."<sup>1</sup> For Washington, the nuclear issue on the Peninsula now increasingly looks like an intractable, permanent problem.

As the United States sees it, today's Pyongyang poses a multifaceted threat. First, with advancing nuclear and missile capabilities, Pyongyang is able to strike the continental United States. Second, Pyongyang's continued nuclear saber-rattling threatens to trigger a wider arms race involving all stakeholders of Northeast Asia, eroding allied trust in U.S. strategic reliability. Third, Pyongyang's possession of sophisticated nuclear and missile technologies carries broader risks of nuclear proliferation as the country may transfer them to whoever are the highest bidders. Fourth, the nuclear and missile programs may be growing too fast to control and a small accident could trigger a nuclear disaster with much broader repercussions.

Based on this perception, Republican and Democratic administrations all regard DPRK as one of the most daunting strategic challenges since the end of the Cold War. The *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*, a declassified strategy document of the Trump administration, highlights Washington's enduring vital interests in Asia: 1) protect the homeland; 2) advance American prosperity; 3) preserve peace through strength; and 4) advance American influence.<sup>2</sup> It also clarifies the U.S. objective for the Korean Peninsula: to "[c]onvince the Kim regime that the only path to its survival is to relinquish its nuclear weapons," and lays out some of the specific actions to achieve it:

Maximize pressure on Pyongyang using economic, diplomatic, military, law enforcement, intelligence, and information tools to cripple North Korea's

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Klingner, "Biden Administration's Korea Policy Represents Change and Continuing Challenges," *Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Autumn/Winter 2020), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> National Security Council, *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2021), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.

weapons of mass destruction programs, choke off currency flows, weaken the regime, and set the conditions for negotiations aimed at reversing its nuclear and missile programs, ultimately achieving the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Peninsula. Consider negotiations if North Korea takes steps to reverse its nuclear and missile programs.<sup>3</sup>

For the United States, the desired end state is a DPRK that “no longer poses a threat to the U.S. homeland or its allies” and a Peninsula “free of nuclear, chemical, cyber, and biological weapons.”<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, even though the government changes hands, some elements of U.S. policy toward the Korean Peninsula remain constant, including, upholding the objective of Pyongyang's denuclearization, non-recognition of DPRK's nuclear state status, no reward for the North's provocation or adventurous behavior, no compensation or assistance as incentives for diplomatic dialogue, little tolerance of Pyongyang's military provocation or threat against Seoul or Tokyo, and increased policy coordination and military cooperation with ROK and Japan.

### **What must be changed?**

As the North's nuclear arsenal and missile technology accelerate, **the Biden administration is under mounting pressure to reexamine past U.S. policies—especially those under Presidents Obama and Trump—to learn the right lessons.**

Critics charge that **in hindsight Mr. Obama's “strategic patience” looked increasingly like “strategic acquiescence” and “strategic passivity,”** granting Pyongyang a strategic respite to significantly upgrade its nuclear capability.<sup>5</sup>

The Trump administration designated Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal as Washington's most immediate security challenge and vowed not to let DPRK acquire the capability to threaten the U.S. homeland. In response to the North's series of nuclear and missile tests in the early months of the Trump administration, Washington launched a “maximum pressure” campaign and shored up military deterrence with the president threatening “fire and fury” against Pyongyang. It was only after then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson articulated that Washington did not seek regime change or the collapse of the regime, an accelerated reunification of the peninsula, or an excuse to send the U.S. military into the North—known as the “Four No's” principle—that the gathering war clouds over the Peninsula began to dissipate. The person-to-person diplomacy between Trump and Kim, in the form of three summit

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Cho Ki-weon, “Will Biden's N. Korea Policy Revert to the ‘Strategic Patience’ of Obama?” *Hankyoreh*, November 13, 2020, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_editorial/969881.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_editorial/969881.html).

meetings and more than two dozen letters, yielded little progress as Washington and Pyongyang had vastly different definitions of denuclearization. The Libya model advocated by then National Security Adviser John Bolton, in which Pyongyang would dismantle its nuclear and missile programs and ship nuclear material out of the country in exchange for sanctions relief and perhaps normal diplomatic relations with Washington, had also failed because Pyongyang was only willing to disable its Yongbyon nuclear facility as a goodwill gesture in return for U.S. lifting all sanctions.

As it turned out, the **three Trump-Kim meetings had only made improvement of U.S.-DPRK ties more difficult**. The attempt to improve bilateral relations through dialogues and correspondence between top decision-makers—in place of multilateral diplomacy like the Six-Party Talks—proved ineffective and the collapse of the Hanoi meeting only highlighted the glaring differences and deepening distrust between the two sides. The tried-and-failed summit diplomacy not only reinforced Washington's perception that Pyongyang would never renounce its nuclear and missile programs, but also exposed Washington's insufficient interagency collaboration among its diplomatic, defense, and intelligence establishments and ill-coordinated efforts with regional stakeholders like China, Russia, and South Korea. An overconfident Trump thought that personal chemistry between top leaders would be the magic wand to eliminate long-running hostility overnight. Relying on personal charisma and backchannel contacts though, Mr. Trump had turned nuclear diplomacy that required expertise and professionalism into what later looked like a vanity project.

Short of articulating a detailed DPRK policy, the Biden administration, in publishing an Interim National Security Strategic Guidance only weeks after taking office, has made clear its assessment and policy response regarding the growing nuclear threat.<sup>6</sup>

Regional actors like Iran and North Korea continue to pursue game-changing capabilities and technologies, while threatening U.S. allies and partners and challenging regional stability....We will empower our diplomats to work to reduce the threat posed by North Korea's growing nuclear and missile programs, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the Republic of Korea and Japan.<sup>7</sup>

The document has defined Pyongyang's threat in more stark terms and elevated the role of U.S. allies in a sought-after united front against DPRK, a

---

<sup>6</sup> The White House press secretary Jen Psaki announced on April 30 that the Biden administration has completed its DPRK policy review. She told reporters that “the administration's goal is complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” and the United States “is open to and will explore diplomacy” in a practical way.

<sup>7</sup> *Renewing America's Advantages: Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

marked contrast to Trump's top-down approach in which allies' voices are a notable absence.

### Countering a growing threat

Major developments in the past four years, including the shifting regional balance of power and deteriorating China-U.S. relations, have also significantly shortened the timetable for Washington to take real action in response to the new context.

**Pyongyang continued to advance rather than freezing or suspending its nuclear and missile programs.** The results of the flurry of tests carried out before November 2017 had all been preserved, complemented by later progress in nuclear facilities and missile technology.<sup>8</sup> Pyongyang's advancing capabilities were on full display at the military parade marking the 75th anniversary of the Workers' Party's founding in October 2020.<sup>9</sup>

Pyongyang had also expanded its arsenal of tactical weapons, such as submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) and multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), which were not banned by UNSC resolutions but whose actual capabilities were not that different from those deemed illicit.<sup>10</sup> The speed and scale of Pyongyang's weapons systems have been stunning, far outpacing Washington and its allies' updated security assessments and reinforcing their sense of insecurity and urgency in the face of an increasingly assertive Pyongyang.

On the current trend, Seoul and Tokyo is set to upgrade their own deterrent capabilities. For example, the South is now working on a three-pronged defense system integrating a Kill Chain preemptive strike system, the Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) initiative, and a Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR) plan, which could be deployed and indigenized within the next few years to counter the North's growing offensive capability.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> "The CNS North Korea Missile Test Database," Nuclear Threat Initiative, October 16, 2020, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/cns-north-korea-missile-test-database/>.

<sup>9</sup> Uzi Rubin, "The 75th Anniversary of North Korea's Kim Dynasty: A Striking and Strange Spectacle," Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, November 1, 2020, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/north-korea-kim-dynasty/>; and Hong Min, "Analysis on the Military Parade Marking the 75th Anniversary of the WPK Foundation," Korea Institute for National Unification, October 12, 2020, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/pyxis-api/1/digital-files/7f148647-cdce-4ae5-92cb-b742df7708c6>.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Elleman, "North Korea's Newest Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile, Same as the Old One?" 38 North, January 15, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/01/north-koreas-newest-submarine-launched-ballistic-missile-same-as-the-old-one/>; and Oh Seok-min, "N.K.'s New Rocket Launcher to Further Complicate S. Korean Artillery, Missile Defense Tasks," Yonhap News Agency, August 28, 2019, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20190828002500325>.

<sup>11</sup> The three constituent systems were later renamed Strategic Target Strike, Korean Missile Defense, and Overwhelming Response, respectively. See Jun Ji-hye, "3 Military Systems to Counter N. Korea: Kill Chain, KAMD, KMPR," *Korea Times*, November 20, 2016, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/11/205\\_217259.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/11/205_217259.html); and Noh Ji-won,

What is more noteworthy is the nine specific goals regarding equipment modernization announced during the Eighth Workers' Party Congress in mid-January 2021, part of which concerns nuclear-powered submarines and hypersonic glide vehicles – items not yet banned by the UN Security Council but may be considered a contravention of UNSC resolutions if actually acquired by the North.<sup>12</sup> This potential conflict may well become a source of a full-scale crisis on the Peninsula in the coming years.

A report by the Council on Foreign Relations released earlier this year ranked Pyongyang's further development of nuclear weapons or ballistic missile testing as a "high-likelihood and high-impact" security risk for the United States and the world at large.<sup>13</sup> The growing Washington consensus on the gravity of the nuclear threat will hasten Team Biden's policy review and compel the new administration to seek a more proactive strategy than Mr. Obama's "strategic patience" even though many of the Obama administration's alumni have returned.

### **Veterans are back**

The U.S. president's personal predilections, worldviews, and working style, combined with those of his national security and foreign policy teams, are also important factors influencing Washington's strategy toward Pyongyang. **Policy change has been made easier as President Biden fills the White House and his cabinet with veteran diplomats, foreign policy wonks, and North Korea experts whose professionalism and experience are expected to contribute some measure of consistency and stability to U.S. strategy toward the Peninsula.**

What most distinguishes Team Biden from the Trump White House is the former's predictability that has stemmed from long years spent in dealing with a variety of intractable global challenges and risks. After four tumultuous years under a president who made consequential decisions by resorting to his instincts and impulses, the Biden administration is reinstating a more traditionalist approach. As Mr. Biden put it in a statement on the eve of his inauguration, his foreign policy team reflects his core belief that "America is

---

"Defense Ministry Changes Terminology for "Three-Axis System" of Military Response," *Hankyoreh*, January 13, 2019,

[http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/878208.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/878208.html).

<sup>12</sup> Oh-Hyuk Kwon, "U.N., E.U. Say N. Korea's New ICBMs Violate U.N. Resolutions," *Dong-a Ilbo*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.donga.com/en/article/all/20201014/2210034/1/U-N-E-U-say-N-Korea-s-new-ICBMs-violate-U-N-resolutions>; "UN Security Council Resolutions on North Korea," Arms Control Association, April 2018, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/UN-Security-Council-Resolutions-on-North-Korea>; and Mary Beth Nikitin et al., "Implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1874," NAPSNet Special Report, Nautilus Institute, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/implementation-of-u-n-security-council-resolution-1874/>.

<sup>13</sup> Paul B. Stares, "Conflicts to Watch in 2021: Preventive Priorities Survey Results," Council on Foreign Relations, January 14, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/report/conflicts-watch-2021>.



strongest when it works with our allies,” and will “use their diplomatic experience and skill to restore America’s global and moral leadership.”<sup>14</sup>

Presenting his foreign policy credentials as a mainstream Democrat, Biden emphasized during a January 2020 presidential debate that he would not meet Kim Jong Un without setting some preconditions. He accused Trump of giving the DPRK leader “legitimacy” and weakening the U.S. sanctions regime against Pyongyang, and pledged to strengthen ties with ROK and Japan, while “putting pressure on China to put pressure on [North] Korea to cease and desist” their nuclear program. During the October 22, 2020, presidential debate, Biden said he would only meet with Kim Jong Un on the condition that “[he] agrees to draw down his nuclear capacity.” His repeated references to Kim Jong Un as “dictator,” “tyrant,” “butcher,” and “thug” furthered dimmed the prospect of a summit meeting in the early months of his administration.<sup>15</sup>

Sitting at the upper echelons of the Biden administration are experienced hands well versed in DPRK policy from their time in the Clinton and Obama administrations.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken is considered a hardliner on Pyongyang. “We have to build genuine economic pressure to squeeze North Korea to get it to the negotiating table,” as he was quoted during an earlier interview, in addition to describing the DPRK leader Kim Jong Un as one of the worst tyrants. In a 2018 *New York Times* op-ed, Blinken indicated his preference for pursuing a policy reminiscent of the Iran deal, which would include an interim agreement that freezes nuclear and missile activities with monitoring in exchange for partial sanctions relief.<sup>16</sup> Having defined U.S. global role in three key words, “leadership,” “cooperation,” and “democracy,” Blinken is expected to upgrade and update Washington’s relations with allies and partners across the “Indo-Pacific.” In his first foreign policy speech as top U.S. diplomat in early March, he designated DPRK as one of the most serious challenges for the United States.<sup>17</sup>

Deputy Secretary of State-designate Wendy Sherman’s experience in DPRK policy dates back to the Clinton administration when she served as the DPRK policy coordinator under Secretary Madeleine Albright from 1997 to 2001. In the Obama years she worked as Under Secretary of State for Political

---

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Lee, “Biden Fills Out State Department Team with Obama Veterans,” Associated Press, January 16, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-biden-cabinet-antony-blinken-foreign-policy-e7026ce218735c9faec9c7349aefb51e>.

<sup>15</sup> Seong-Chang Cheong, “Outlook and Tasks for U.S.-North Korea Policy Post-Election,” *Asia Dispatches*, Wilson Center, October 27, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/outlook-and-tasks-us-north-korea-policy-post-election>.

<sup>16</sup> “Biden Picks N. Korea Hardliner Blinken as Secretary of State,” *Dong-a Ilbo*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.donga.com/en/Search/article/all/20201124/2250203/1/Biden-picks-N-Korea-hardliner-Blinken-as-secretary-of-state>.

<sup>17</sup> Antony J. Blinken, “A Foreign Policy for the American People,” U.S. Department of State, March 3, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>.



Affairs between 2011 and 2015 and played a key part in negotiating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. A dove policy wonk turned hardliner, she stressed the necessity of all-out pressures on Pyongyang including military measures and once made harsh remarks by saying that Kim Jong Un should be called a murderous dictator.<sup>18</sup> She acknowledged the complexity of a complete, irreversible, and verifiable dismantlement of DPRK's nuclear program, thinking that it required "more than a steep climb."<sup>19</sup>

National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan served as Director of Policy Planning under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during the Obama administration and played a central role in the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

Kurt Campbell, the Biden administration's Asia czar, is also an alumnus of Democratic administrations. Before he joined the Obama administration as the top State Department Asia official, Dr. Campbell served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia and the Pacific in the Clinton administration. During the Obama years, as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, he was also known as the chief architect of the Pivot to Asia strategy.<sup>20</sup>

Sung Kim,<sup>21</sup> Biden's nominee to be Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, oversees U.S. policies toward China, South Korea, Japan, and Mongolia. As a Korean American, his long diplomatic career has revolved around Asian and Korean Peninsula affairs, having served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, special representative for DPRK Policy, Special Envoy for the Six-Party Talks, and ambassador to ROK.

Jung H. Pak, a former intelligence officer and senior fellow at Brookings Institution, has also joined the Biden administration as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State.<sup>22</sup> While at Brookings, she authored *Becoming Kim Jong Un*, which draws from her deep knowledge and experience as a veteran CIA analyst.

---

<sup>18</sup> "Wendy Sherman Is Likely to Rank Top 2nd in U.S. State Department," *Dong-A Ilbo*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.donga.com/en/Search/article/all/20210107/2353225/1/Wendy-Sherman-is-likely-to-rank-top-2nd-in-U-S-State-Department>.

<sup>19</sup> Wendy R. Sherman, "Don't Get Too Excited about the Korea Summit. There's A Lot of Work to Do," *Washington Post*, April 28, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dont-get-too-excited-about-the-korea-summit-theres-a-lot-of-work-to-do/2018/04/27/7c2d8ea2-4a55-11e8-827e-190efaf1f1ee\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dont-get-too-excited-about-the-korea-summit-theres-a-lot-of-work-to-do/2018/04/27/7c2d8ea2-4a55-11e8-827e-190efaf1f1ee_story.html).

<sup>20</sup> Demetri Sevastopulo, "Joe Biden Poised to Name Foreign Policy Expert as Asia Tsar," *Financial Times*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/ac4c02f4-48a7-49f3-9a06-0c3879750b37>.

<sup>21</sup> President Biden announced on May 21 that Sung Kim would serve as the U.S. Special Representative for the DPRK. The news was delivered alongside the ROK President Moon Jae-in's visit in Washington, D.C.

<sup>22</sup> "Ex-CIA and N. Korea Expert Named Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asia," Yonhap News Agency, January 27, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210127006700325>.

## Biden's DPRK Policy: A Preview

As the Biden administration faces multiple domestic challenges, Korean Peninsula nuclear issue is not on the top of its list of immediate concerns. It will take some time for the new administration to put together, on the one hand, a new, comprehensive DPRK policy that not only reflects changed facts on the ground but also plugs the existing policy gaps, and, on the other hand, a competent team that will faithfully implement the president's strategic priorities vis-à-vis Pyongyang. Furthermore, the Biden administration's policy process will undoubtedly be influenced by two other variables: the two Koreas.

### A comprehensive review

In his inaugural address on January 20, 2021, Mr. Biden declared that "This is a time of testing. We face an attack on democracy and on truth. A raging virus. Growing inequity. The sting of systemic racism. A climate in crisis. America's role in the world."<sup>23</sup> He did not mention the Korean Peninsula throughout the speech. For President Biden who is facing the arduous task of nation building at home, with the daunting domestic challenges of COVID-19 pandemic, economic recovery, and political polarization to be addressed, the Korean Peninsula can hardly be a priority on his policy agenda. Washington is trying to head off any incident that might waste its diplomatic resources as a result of rash engagement with Pyongyang.

With the positions of Special Representative for the DPRK<sup>24</sup> and ambassador to the ROK still unfilled, the Biden administration is just two members short of a full DPRK policy team. What remains to be seen is how smoothly the North experts at the State Department will work with Biden's National Security Council led by Jake Sullivan and Kurt Campbell, and how other parts of the national security establishment like the Department of Defense, CIA, and Director of National Intelligence (DNI) will weigh in on the DPRK policy process.

Recent statements of the Biden team indicate that they are still reviewing the entire approach and policy toward DPRK, and have yet to offer more specifics. At his confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Antony Blinken designated the North as "a hard problem that has plagued administration after administration... a problem that has not gotten better – in fact, it's gotten worse." He said the review, starting with consulting

---

<sup>23</sup> Briefing Room, "Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.," White House, January 20, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/>.

<sup>24</sup> President Biden announced on May 21 that Sung Kim would serve as the U.S. Special Representative for the DPRK. The news was delivered alongside the ROK President Moon Jae-in's visit in Washington, D.C.

closely with allies and partners, particularly with South Korea and Japan, would involve “look[ing] at what options we have, and what can be effective in terms of increasing pressure on North Korea to come to the negotiating table, as well as what other diplomatic initiatives may be possible.”<sup>25</sup> Two days after Biden's inauguration, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki announced at a press briefing that Washington would “adopt a new strategy to keep the American people and our allies safe. That approach will begin with a thorough policy review of the state of play in North Korea, in close consultation with South Korea, Japan, and other allies on ongoing pressure options and the potential for any future diplomacy.”<sup>26</sup> In sum, Biden's Korean Peninsula policy team will discuss all the possible options based on a full, comprehensive, and thorough review of all past U.S. policies to Pyongyang in order to formulate a “new strategy.”

### **Speed and direction matter**

Some experts predicted that the review might take more than half a year, while others thought that the Biden administration would expedite the process and take swift action. The fact that Biden's foreign policy and national security team have already talked with their South Korean counterparts by the end of March indicates that the new administration is likely to complete the review and make public the new North Korea strategy in April or May.

The Biden administration may arrive at a new strategy that draw from three possible models.<sup>27</sup>

The first is the “denuclearization for compensation” option. The underlying assumption is that without external pressure Pyongyang will not give up its nuclear weapons—the only insurance of its survival. Denuclearization would have to be an imposition by external actors. Under this model, the Biden team will continue his predecessor's maximum pressure campaign by working with regional allies and partners to strengthen military coercion, economic sanctions, and diplomatic isolation against Pyongyang. Washington could also launch covert actions and psychological warfare to sow the seeds of discord and disorder within the DPRK society. Championing this course of action are hardliners like Jung H. Pak.

The second option is an “incremental and reciprocal denuclearization in stages” process. In this option, proponents advise that, Washington should develop a new negotiating strategy based on the reality—if not an official

---

<sup>25</sup> “Blinken Says U.S. Plans Full Review of Approach to North Korea,” Reuters, January 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-biden-state-northkorea-idUSKBN29O2QG>.

<sup>26</sup> Briefing Room, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Economic Director Brian Deese,” January 22, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/01/22/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-and-national-economic-director-brian-deese/>.

<sup>27</sup> Moon Chung-in, “The 3 Competing Viewpoints in Biden Administration's Potential N. Korea Policy,” *Hankyoreh*, November 30, 2020, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_editorial/972169.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_editorial/972169.html).

recognition – that Pyongyang is now a nuclear-capable country. A pragmatic U.S. approach should include demands that Pyongyang freeze its nuclear and missile programs and dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear facility in exchange for partial sanctions relief, diplomatic normalization, and security guarantees. Such initial confidence-building measures, complemented by ensuing parallel, reciprocal actions by both Washington and Pyongyang, are the only path leading to the final, verifiable, and complete removal of nuclear material, weapons, and facilities. This is an approach preferred by former senior Democratic officials like Defense Secretary William Perry and the younger generation of arms control experts in the Biden camp.

Finally, there are those who think the nuclear issue ought to be managed to maintain stability, a majority view endorsed by among Biden's foreign policy advisors. Pointing out that Pyongyang is unlikely to give up its nuclear weapons in the short term and that its weapons cannot be eliminated through military action, they say the best approach is to manage the threat. This course of action involves a whole range of corresponding measures in response to different Pyongyang actions. If Pyongyang shows interest in and takes concrete actions on denuclearization, Washington will engage in good-faith negotiations. The North's provocations will be met with harsh punishments or retaliations. If Pyongyang maintains the status quo, Washington and other parties will continue the "ruthless dismissal" policy.

**The above three models are not distinctly separate from each other. Elements in each option may be incorporated into other courses of action.** For example, the second model shared some elements with the third one. Managing Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions may be integrated as a stage or essential pillar in a more comprehensive policy package for denuclearization, after all crisis management itself is not Washington's desired end state. The Biden team may pursue a nuclear deal similar to the one with Iran in 2015, as Secretary of State Antony Blinken wrote in an opinion piece in the *New York Times* in 2018.<sup>28</sup> It indicates that the Biden administration may be more interested in a phased, pragmatic agreement that emphasizes a gradual freeze of Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities.

### **Lines of effort**

Neither will Biden rush to a summit meeting with Kim Jong Un nor will he pursue robust person-to-person diplomacy without full preparations at working levels. But the Biden team is expected to pick up, glean, revamp, and update some elements of Trump's maximum pressure strategy to advance nuclear diplomacy on U.S. terms.

Following are the three major lines of effort that will most likely drive Biden's diplomacy vis-à-vis Pyongyang.

---

<sup>28</sup> Kang Seung-woo, "Blinken Indicates Changing Course in North Korea Policy," *Korean Times*, January 10, 2021, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/01/103\\_302775.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/01/103_302775.html).

First, **improve maximum pressure and close sanctions loopholes.**

“Maximum pressure” is a U.S. policy implemented from the late Obama administration to the Trump administration to curb Pyongyang’s missile and nuclear programs and facilitate negotiations. Yet in reality, it has failed to achieve its primary goal of curbing DPRK’s nuclear ambitions. In terms of policy continuity, “maximum pressure” is a formal policy that spans two administrations. If the coercive elements of George H. W. Bush’s DPRK policy are counted in, the United States has a longer history of exerting maximum pressure on Pyongyang. Thus, it is unlikely for the Biden administration to break away from this long-running pattern. Even as he pursued major breakthroughs by initiating summit meetings, Trump has never renounced maximum pressure as a fallback option. If the Biden administration intends to get Pyongyang to agree to “a partial freeze of nuclear activities in exchange for partial sanctions relief” proposed at the 2019 Hanoi Summit, maximum pressure is one of the few policy tools that the team may resort to.

Washington believes that maximum pressure has failed to yield the desired results against Pyongyang, owing to the obvious loopholes in the international sanctions regime. The Biden administration will rely on the rejuvenated U.S. alliance system to tighten the sanctions. Nevertheless, getting China and Russia on board will be a test of the Biden team’s negotiating skills as well as the practicability of “maximum pressure.”

Second, **design a roadmap for phased denuclearization based on synchronized mutual steps.**

After rejecting John Bolton’s “Libya model” out of hand, Pyongyang proposed a “phased, synchronized steps” plan for nuclear disarmament. At the Hanoi summit meeting in 2019, Pyongyang put forward “Yongbyon for sanctions relief” as an opening phase of the plan but to no avail. After that, Pyongyang refused to include denuclearization as a topic of dialogue at the working level.<sup>29</sup>

Given years of stalemate and new developments in DPRK’s nuclear program, the Biden administration are left with fewer options. Now Washington and Pyongyang seem to have switched places—the former receptive to the proposal while the latter reluctant. Even if both sides are willing to move forward with the proposal, the path ahead will be long, winding, and all uphill as there is no agreed roadmap or timetable on disarmament.

Denuclearization begins with the declaration of nuclear programs. The DPRK insists on including its south neighbor in the declaration mechanism. The second step is inspection and verification. In the long, mistrustful history of nuclear negotiations between the United States and DPRK, intrusive inspection has always been a catalyst that may plunge the denuclearization

---

<sup>29</sup> [Johan Ahlander](#) and [Philip O'Connor](#), “North Korea Breaks off Nuclear Talks with U.S. in Sweden,” Reuters, October 5, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-sweden-idUSKCN1WK074>.



process into a crisis. When Washington encounters a bottleneck in designing or implementing the denuclearization roadmap, it might resort to tightening sanctions to coerce Pyongyang into cooperation, which would be regarded by the North as evidence of “retrogression” or “hostility.” Thus, a new round of crisis may be brewing again.

Therefore, based on the principle of “word for word and action for action,” the United States and DPRK need a comprehensive agreement on the phased implementation of denuclearization, which means that the roadmap and corresponding measures must be clearly defined, including steps of the denuclearization process, such as “declaration, inspection, verification, disablement, and dismantlement,” as well as the rights and obligations of each party.

**Third, allow South Korea and Japan more altitude to upgrade their deterrent capabilities.**

In the face of Pyongyang's advancing nuclear and missile programs complemented with superiority in conventional forces over Tokyo and Seoul, the Biden administration is likely to encourage South Korea and Japan to significantly improve their deterrent capabilities by helping them develop offensive capabilities in conventional weapons, including allowing preemptive strike systems. The revised version of *U.S.–South Korea Missile Guidelines* has lifted the restrictions on South Korea's conventional ballistic missile ranges and payloads.<sup>30</sup> Conventional ballistic missile development and indigenous production capabilities are essential to the 3K capabilities – Kill Chain, KAMD, and KMPR.<sup>31</sup> In the case of Japan, which is limited by its exclusively defense-oriented policy, the development of its offensive capabilities has been relatively slow.

Granting South Korea and Japan greater strategic latitude would also pose a threat to China's security. For historical reasons, China has been adamant in its opposition to Japan's acquisition of offensive capabilities. In fact, if the Biden administration wish any of the three lines of effort to be effective, it needs to gain China's understanding.

### **Lingering uncertainties**

There are uncertainties in the Biden administration's policy toward DPRK. On the one hand, Team Biden's assessment of DPRK's nuclear capabilities and intentions, and initial Washington-Pyongyang interactions, will directly affect President Biden's decision-making. On the other hand, North and South

---

<sup>30</sup> On May 21, President Joe Biden and President Moon Jae-in announced the termination of the guideline on Seoul's missile use, which means the U.S. will no longer impose restrictions on the ranges and payloads of South Korea's missiles.

<sup>31</sup> Ankit Panda, “Solid Ambitions: The US-South Korea Missile Guidelines and Space Launchers,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 25, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/25/solid-ambitions-u.s.-south-korea-missile-guidelines-and-space-launchers-pub-82557>.



Koreas are external variables to the Biden administration's policy toward the North.

Pyongyang may grow impatient and take early actions to make breakthroughs in DPRK-U.S. relations or gain first-mover leverage in nuclear diplomacy going forward, because it has suffered from the combined effects of the sanctions, the Covid-19 pandemic and natural disasters since 2020. For example, after Obama took office in 2009, DPRK launched a long-range missile (Kwangmyongsong-2) and conducted its second nuclear test. Following Obama's reelection, Pyongyang launched a long-range missile (Unha-3) and conducted its third nuclear test. After Trump took office in 2017, DPRK launched an intermediate-range ballistic missile (Pukguksong-2) and conducted multiple nuclear and missile tests.<sup>32</sup>

In the early days of the Biden administration, if Pyongyang took major actions, the nuclear crisis could flare up again, reducing the likelihood of dialogue between the United States and DPRK and lengthening the time to improve relations.

In the case of South Korea, as the presidential election will be held in March 2022, from the second half of 2021 onward, political parties will be focusing on campaigning, and the ROK-DPRK relationship may take a back seat to domestic politics. Furthermore, since the president in South Korea cannot be reelected, Moon Jae-in will leave office next year. If Biden misses this year's opportunity to engage with South Korea, he will have to wait until May 2022 when South Korea has a new government and a new diplomatic and security team before the two countries can begin to communicate properly. By then there will be more uncertainties, because what kind of policy the new South Korean government will adopt toward the North is unknown, and Moon Jae-in's efforts to have dialogue with the North in the past few years will be in vain.

At the New Year's press conference in 2021, Moon Jae-in admitted that he did not have much time to bring about results on the North's denuclearization, but he would do his best for the last time, leaving open the possibility of another inter-Korean summit. To this end, Moon recently replaced three key team members and appointed Chung Eui-yong as foreign minister, Suh Hoon as national security office director, and Park Ji-won as director of the National Intelligence Agency, all of whom have been deeply involved in the inter-Korean summit diplomacy since the Kim Dae-jung administration. It is evident that Moon will focus on initiating inter-Korean and DPRK-U.S. summit meetings in his remaining time in office. Therefore, Moon's administration will seize the precious opportunity in the first half of 2021 to work closely with Washington and coordinate policies toward the North.

---

<sup>32</sup> Park Chan-su, "Kim Jong-un Needs to Exercise Patience after Saying Goodbye to Trump," *Hankyoreh*, November 26, 2020, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_editorial/971699.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_editorial/971699.html).

## The ROK Factor

Having renounced Trump's transactional approach to U.S. allies and partners, the Biden administration will reaffirm America's democratic values, return to multilateral cooperation, and move forward with a competition-centered geostrategy to restore the transatlantic alliance and reclaim U.S. leadership on the world stage. Several changes may take place to U.S.-ROK relations under the Biden administration.

First, **Captain America is back**. Putting relations with allies and partners back at the center of U.S. foreign policy, the Biden administration is expected to repair and revive Washington's frayed alliance system to meet the challenges presented by "nondemocratic countries." Apparently, however, it would be naive to believe that America will simply return as a member who respects its allies' opinions, accommodates their interests, or unites them as equals. **Instead, the Biden administration expects allies to follow its lead and make more contribution in the U.S.-dominated alliance system.** In the case of South Korea, the United States is likely to ask for more efforts by Seoul in building the U.S.-endorsed value system.

Invitations have been extended to South Korea to join the G-7, QUAD+, anti-China digital alliance, and summit for democracy, all of which are political or economic groupings to counter China's growing influence. But picking a side between America and China will cost South Korea dearly as it shares immense common interests with China in political, economic, and security spheres.

Second, **the Biden administration will elevate South Korea's status within the alliance as a counterweight.** From America's perspective, the U.S.-ROK alliance is a primary deterrent to the threat posed by Pyongyang's growing nuclear arsenal. Its geographical location makes South Korea a vulnerable target within the range of the North's nuclear weapons, necessitating a U.S. nuclear umbrella and stationed troops as material as well as moral support. As Washington sees it, Seoul's strategic reliance on the United States leave it few other options but to offer full cooperation in response to the North's growing military threat. Besides, owing to its strategic location, moderately developed economy, sound international reputation, and political aspirations, South Korea has the potential to play a consequential role in advancing America's Northeast Asia policy, Asia-Pacific policy as well as its vision for building a regional order in the "Indo-Pacific." More importantly, as China's close neighbor and trading partner, South Korea shares a lot of common interests with China in safeguarding regional security and stability and is China's potential partner to build a sustainable security order. Its leaning toward the United States will put China under pressure, which is a desirable goal for Washington. To this end, the Biden administration will elevate South Korea's status by broadening the U.S.-ROK alliance and position South Korea as a major ally to materialize its "Indo-

Pacific" vision.

**Many leftover issues from the 20th century have to be addressed before the U.S.-ROK alliance can be upgraded to meet challenges of the new century.** Shortly after being confirmed as the new Secretary of State, Antony Blinken called his South Korean counterpart to reiterate how much the administration values the U.S.-ROK alliance and reaffirmed Washington's commitment to expand the relationship.<sup>33</sup> It is predictable that an all-round review of their alliance is underway in Washington, not only to formulate an effective strategy in response to a nuclear-armed Pyongyang, but also to tackle challenges presented by a rising China for the sake of America's interests across the "Indo-Pacific" region.<sup>34</sup>

**Third, the United States will try to resolve disagreements with South Korea in multiple sensitive areas.** Guided by the goal of reinvigorating the transatlantic alliance, the Biden administration will not allow for further deterioration in U.S.-ROK relations that has been seriously damaged under the previous administration. Washington will probably commit to several lines of effort, such as **making a little concession on the enduring disagreement of defense cost-sharing, promising not to pare down American military presence on the Korean Peninsula within a time limit, proactively negotiating for the transfer of wartime operational control authority (OPCON), and putting off personnel deployment that reinforces the United Nations Command.** But the way ahead will not be without obstacles as most of these issues concern both parties' practical interests.

In early March 2021, the United States and South Korea agreed on a new cost-sharing deal of keeping U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula for the next six years.<sup>35</sup> The agreement was praised as "fair" by South Korea and "sincere" by the United States—both are consciously shaping an impression that bilateral relations are improving and disagreements are being resolved. On reducing military presence, President Biden may also back down from his predecessor's position. When running for president last year, he has made it clear that if he won the election, he would stand with South Korea, strengthening the alliance to safeguard peace in East Asia and beyond, rather than extorting Seoul with reckless threats to remove America's troops.<sup>36</sup> But interim arrangements does not mean the issue of defense burden-sharing and military presence will not surface again in the years to come. Making allies to pay more for hosting U.S. troops is now a long-term trend and the Biden

---

<sup>33</sup> Kim Seung-yeon and Byun Duk-kun, "FM, Blinken Agree in Phone Talks that N.K. Nuke Issue Urgent Matter for Biden Administration," Yonhap News Agency, January 27, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210127006800325>.

<sup>34</sup> Kristine Lee, Joshua Fitt, and Coby Goldbe, "Renew, Elevate, Modernize: A Blueprint for a 21st-Century U.S.-ROK Alliance Strategy," Center for A New American Security, November 24, 2020, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/renew-elevate-modernize-a-blueprint-for-a-21st-century-u-s-rok-alliance-strategy>.

<sup>35</sup> Byun Duk-kun, "S. Korea, US Reached 'Fair' Agreement on Defense Cost-sharing: S. Korean Negotiator," Yonhap News Agency, March 9, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210309000200325>.

<sup>36</sup> Joe Biden, "Hope for Our Better Future," Yonhap News Agency, October 29, 2020, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20201030000500325>.

administration is only doing it in a different way. For South Korea, the ever-increasing cost is problematic itself. Opposition is rising from the Korean public, criticizing the United States for “making a profit” out of its stationed troops while blaming the government for relying on America without developing its own defense capabilities. Seoul is made even more anxious at nonstop messages coming from Washington that the U.S. might withdraw troops from the Korean Peninsula, fearing that it would not be sufficiently protected when under attack.

The OPCON transition is yet another sensitive issue. Gen. Robert Abrams, Commander of ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC), and United States Forces Korea (USFK), holds that it is still premature to make the transfer during President Moon Jae-in's term in office.<sup>37</sup> The Pentagon also stresses that the transition will only take place when all necessary conditions are met.<sup>38</sup> While the Moon administration has always wanted to retake OPCON within his term, Washington may use it as a breakthrough to revitalize U.S.-ROK relations. More recently, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Won In-choul and his U.S. counterpart Gen. Mark Milley agreed to continue efforts this year to make “visible progress” on the envisioned transition.<sup>39</sup> If the issue can be addressed, it is not just a major achievement of the Moon administration, it is also a highlight to propagate the restored relations with the United States. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that the first U.S.-ROK springtime combined military exercise in 2021 was staged in a scaled-back manner on March 8 due to the coronavirus pandemic and peace efforts with Pyongyang. A Full Operational Capability (FOC) test was also postponed until the second half of this year, further dimming prospects for Seoul's retaking of OPCON from Washington at an early date.<sup>40</sup> It seems that the OPCON transition will not be high on the agenda as it is neither urgent nor thorny in the eyes of America.

Seoul has also realized that Washington is no longer what it used to be. Though it used to account for more than half of the world's GDP in 1950s, now the figure is less than 25 percent. By contrast, China is now taking 16 percent with its 1.4 billion population. In this context, Seoul believes that Washington will no longer shoulder all the responsibility and cost and will take back what it handed out. Therefore, when coordinating with Washington's policy agenda, Seoul may not have high expectations – maybe that is more helpful to

---

<sup>37</sup> Choi Soo-hyang, “USFK Commander Says Capability of N. Korea's New Weapons Yet to Be Verified,” Yonhap News Agency, November 20, 2020, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20201120009200325>.

<sup>38</sup> Oh Seok-min and Choi Soo-hyang, “Pentagon Chief Says Wartime Operational Control Transition Will Take More Time,” Yonhap News Agency, January 29, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210318007251325?section=search>.

<sup>39</sup> “Military Chiefs of S. Korea, U.S. Agree to Make ‘Visible Progress’ on OPCON Transition,” Yonhap News Agency, February 2, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210202002800325?section=search>.

<sup>40</sup> Oh Seok-min, “S. Korea, U.S. Set to Wrap Up Springtime Combined Exercise Amid COVID-19, N.K. Protest,” Yonhap News Agency, March 18, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210317011500325>.

develop equal U.S.-ROK relations.<sup>41</sup>

Fourth, Washington will interpose, albeit in a limited manner, between Tokyo and Seoul to steer the ROK-Japan relationship to best serve America's interest. Relations between U.S. allies are one of the most important issues on Biden's foreign policy agenda. Team Biden will attach more importance to mediating ROK-Japan relations to improve trilateral coordination so as to counter China, Russia, and DPRK. The long-running and deep-seated ROK-Japan tensions are tied to the lingering wounds of national pride and justice. The Obama administration's effort to resolve the comfort women issue had proved futile. The then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke publicly for South Korean comfort women to pressure Japan also took little effect. The Trump White House was not interested in doing justice to this issue – though South Korea pinned its hope on Washington to do so – as it did not regard the tension as an impediment to trilateral cooperation. After ROK-Japan relations worsened, the United States even laid more blame on South Korea, fueling widespread opposition in South Korea.

Yet the Biden administration is likely to adopt a similar stance, encouraging the two sides to refrain from conflicts and work toward reconciliation while asking them to cooperate with Washington and build mutual trust to enhance trilateral coordination. In his first phone call with South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha as U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken stressed the importance of continued U.S.-ROK-Japan cooperation, which had put South Korea under pressure.<sup>42</sup> **But admittedly, when dealing with ROK-Japan relations, the United States is mulling something else: a certain level of tension between South Korea and Japan is beneficial to America's centrality in trilateral relations as well as the internal balance of the Northeast Asian wing of the U.S.-led alliance.** Consequently, Washington will hardly go all out to play the role of a mediator but focus more on improving trilateral coordination for its own interests.

Fifth, **the United States will seek closer alignment on North Korea policy with South Korea.** As far as the Biden administration is concerned, a pressing task at hand is to formulate a synchronized joint action plan and strengthen deterrence against DPRK to steer the situation into America's desired direction.

The DPRK policy discord between Washington and Seoul garnered much attention during the Trump administration. South Korea still regards its northern neighbor as the biggest threat to its survival, fearing that the North might launch a military counterattack if America continues to enforce stringent blockade and containment against Pyongyang. The diverging perceptions of Pyongyang's security threat are creating rifts in the allies' priorities. **The Moon administration is engaging in a peace process, seeking**

---

<sup>41</sup> Lee Daewoo, "America's Choice in 2020: ROK-U.S. Relations," *Sejong Commentary*, No. 27 (November 2020), <http://sejong.org/board/22/egoread.php?bd=22&itm=&txt=&pg=1&seq=5650>.

<sup>42</sup> Kim Ji-eun, "Kang Kyung-wha and Antony Blinken Agree on Urgency of N. Korea's Denuclearization During First Phone Call," *Hankyoreh*, January 28, 2021, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/980874.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/980874.html).



**more tolerance, lifting of sanctions, and an end-war declaration with DPRK, while the Biden administration underscores visible progress on denuclearization and resolution of human rights issue.** Left unattended, the widening gaps in security perceptions and policy goals may seriously impair the U.S.-ROK alliance.

From Pyongyang's point of view, military coercion remains an option for the Biden administration. The hostile nature of America's DPRK policy will never change no matter who's in the White House. Pyongyang has to keep building up its nuclear arsenal to deter all possible forms of military threat.<sup>43</sup> The North's recent Eighth Party Congress has put additional pressure on South Korea as Pyongyang made clear that Seoul's proposals on petty issues such as pandemic control, humanitarian cooperation, and unguided tourism—intended to create the false impression that Seoul was intensely interested in improving inter-Korean relations—in fact could not bring any fundamental changes to bilateral relations, and the restoration of North-South relations was entirely up to the South.<sup>44</sup> In doing so, Pyongyang was, on the one hand, throwing the ball back into Seoul's court, and, on the other, making room for maneuver for the next stage of engagement, consciously exerting influence upon U.S.-ROK coordination.

At America's requests, South Korea will have a series of choices to make based on its own interests: How should it behave amid growing China-U.S. competition? What should it stick to in dealing with Japan? What is its ultimate goal vis-à-vis the North Korea, denuclearization or reunification?<sup>45</sup> By seeking denuclearization, engaging in the peace process, improving ROK-DPRK relations, and carrying out economic cooperation, South Korea should fully leverage strategic flexibility to find the most suitable and reasonable solutions in pursuit of irreversible peace on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Shim Kyu-seok, "Workers' Party Congress Adopts Defense Rules," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, January 10, 2021, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/01/10/national/northKorea/North-Korea-8th-Party-Congress-Kim-Jongun/20210110180800555.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Lee Je-hun, "The Background Behind Kim Jong-un's 'Return to the Spring of 3 Years Ago,'" *Hankyoreh*, January 11, 2021, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_northkorea/978282.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/978282.html).

<sup>45</sup> Choi Kang, "How to Go Together with the Biden Administration," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, November 17, 2020, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/the-chosun-ilbo-op-ed-how-to-go-together-with-the-biden-administration/>.

<sup>46</sup> Chung Jae-hung, "America's Choice in 2020: U.S.-China Relations," *Sejong Commentary*, No. 28 (November 2020), <http://sejong.org/board/22/egoread.php?bd=22&itm=&txt=&pg=1&seq=5651>.



## The Peninsula amid Great Power Competition

Other than “maximum pressure,” the Trump administration had no detailed roadmap or consistent guidance for its DPRK policy. What drove Team Trump throughout his presidency was his transactional myopia. Trump was right in initiating one-on-one meetings with Kim Jong Un as a diplomatic breakthrough, but he seemed to know little and care less about the political overtones and ramifications of person-to-person diplomacy. **The three headline-grabbing summit meetings, as it turned out, had not slowed or reversed Pyongyang's nuclear and missile progress.** Critics charged that Trump's handshakes with Kim and the “sincere” assurances of denuclearization without concrete action plan had offered Pyongyang the fastest track to diplomatic recognition and *de facto* nuclear status.<sup>47</sup>

Trump's diplomatic maneuvering on the Korean Peninsula had also undermined China-U.S. mutual trust. In response to Pyongyang's series of nuclear tests in his first year in office, Trump turned to Beijing for support of UNSC resolutions against the North. China and the other members of the Security Council lined up behind relevant resolutions to maintain the integrity of the international nonproliferation regime and stability and peace of Northeast Asia. Following the Singapore Summit in mid-June 2018, as Trump thought he could safely take the Korea matter into his own hands, Washington began to gear up for a full-scale trade war by imposing higher tariffs on Chinese goods, plunging the bilateral relationship into a historic low. Great power competition, in the case of China-U.S. relations, had turned into intensifying strategic confrontation.

The Biden administration continues Trump's competitive—if not confrontational—strategy toward China and defines today's world in terms of great power strategic rivalry.<sup>48</sup> **This judgement on the part of the United States, for now still the world's most powerful nation, is changing the generally cooperative climate in which great powers has approached the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue since the end of the Cold War.**

Beijing is well aware of the growing competitiveness of major power relations, but still think great power coordination is possible, especially in the face of common challenges. As Chinese President Xi Jinping put it in a speech at the World Economic Forum earlier this year: “Every choice and move we

---

<sup>47</sup> Vipin Narang and Ankit Panda, “North Korea Is a Nuclear Power. Get Used to It.” *New York Times*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/12/opinion/trump-kim-summit-denuclearization-north-korea.html>; and Krishnadev Calamur, “Kim Jong Un's Propaganda Victory,” *Atlantic*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/kim-jong-un-propaganda/562613/>.

<sup>48</sup> Briefing Room, “Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World,” White House, February 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.

make today will shape the world of the future. It is important that we properly address the four major tasks facing people of our times." As China sees it, the best path forward for humankind is one of peaceful coexistence, mutual benefit, and win-win cooperation.<sup>49</sup> Going forward, a major factor influencing the Northeast Asian security landscape is whether the new administration will meet halfway with China and initiate positive interactions at a time when it is redesigning its foreign policy agenda.

Beijing's endorsement of the goal of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula and unwavering commitment to the integrity of the global nonproliferation regime leave considerable room for China-U.S. cooperation. **But the sheer complexity of the nuclear issue means that even if there is cooperation, political wrangling is at the same time inescapable.** To begin with, Beijing and Washington have different understandings of the root cause of Pyongyang's nuclear crisis and the larger security challenges on the Peninsula. While Washington identifies the North as the ultimate source of all problems, Beijing thinks some of Pyongyang's security concerns are legitimate and a peaceful settlement requires a changed security environment in Northeast Asia.

Then there is the difference over policy toolkit. As Pyongyang's neighbor, Beijing put the highest premium on regional stability and peace, ruling out military force as a viable option and promoting a "denuclearization in stages" model. But the geographic distance between DPRK and the U.S. mainland gives Washington a different perspective and prioritization: denuclearization takes precedence over regional stability. The maximum pressure campaign was intended to force Pyongyang to enter into negotiations by fomenting social upheaval. As Beijing sees it, **the policy of maximum pressure itself is a potential source of instability and contains the seed of conflict between not only DPRK and the United States but also China and the United States.**

Last but not least, Beijing and Washington approach Pyongyang with very different mindsets. While Washington increasingly looks at today's world through a familiar (new) Cold War prism, regarding triumph in great power competitions as its top priority, Beijing rejects the notion that a new cold war is already upon us, and holds out hope that the world can find a post-Cold War solution to a holdover issue from an earlier era.

China-U.S. interaction over the Korean Peninsula will remain a complicated process, with the U.S. competitive strategic posture adding a new layer of uncertainty. In this context, crisis prevention and management is urgently needed to maintain peace and stability on the Peninsula. All regional stakeholders should refrain from doing anything provocative. The United States should renounce its hostile policy toward the North, and Pyongyang should also keep restraint on nuclear testing, testing missile and other

---

<sup>49</sup> Xi Jinping, "Let the Torch of Multilateralism Light up Humanity's Way Forward," Chinese Foreign Ministry, January 25, 2021, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1848323.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1848323.shtml).

sensitive weapons. All parties should create conditions rather than erect roadblocks for dialogue and cooperation.

Task Force on Korean Peninsula Policy

September 2021

2021 by Shanghai Institutes for International Studies. All rights reserved.

195-15 Tianlin Road, Xuhui, Shanghai, P.R.China

021-54614900 | [www.siis.org.cn](http://www.siis.org.cn)