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Implications of the Biden-Suga Summit for Moon's US Visit

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On April 16, the United States-Japan summit between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide was held in Washington, DC. The summit was the first face-to-face leaders' meeting since the inauguration of the Biden administration. Taking place at a time when U.S.-China conflict has been intensifying, it drew international attention. Through the summit, the U.S. and Japan strengthened their alliance by becoming a "Global Partnership for a New Era," and secured each other's mutual support by covering sensitive issues such as Taiwan and balancing against China. Such moves by the U.S. and Japan have significant implications for the upcoming South Korea-U.S. summit, which is expected to be held in late May. What achievements and challenges did Japan have in this summit? This *Asan Issue Brief* analyzes the achievements and challenges of Prime Minister Suga's visit to the U.S. and explores the implications for the ROK.

1. Evaluating the U.S.-Japan Summit: Achievements and Challenges

■ What did Japan achieve? Prime Minister Suga's diplomatic challenge

For Prime Minister Suga, who is considered vulnerable in terms of diplomatic issues, the U.S.-Japan summit was a significant meeting and a test of his diplomatic skills that could

affect his future political fortunes, including resolving the COVID-19 crisis, Japan's economic recovery, and the Tokyo Olympics. Then, what did Japan gain from this meeting?

■ **Achievements: The emphasized presence of Japan in U.S. foreign policy**

By becoming the first foreign leader to have a face-to-face meeting with President Biden, Prime Minister Suga decisively demonstrated the importance of U.S.-Japan relations and the U.S.-Japan alliance to the world. This can be seen as a sign of Japan's importance and position in U.S. regional strategy. Above all, the policy of realizing the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) with the U.S. and Japan, as stated in the first section of their Joint Statement, was to empower Japan's external vision and initiative. The reaffirmation of the application of Article V of the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, one of Japan's biggest security concerns, was also a measure to assuage fears of an incident caused by China and to ensure deterrence.

Regarding the North Korean issue, the two countries also reached consensus on the complete denuclearization of North Korea, urging North Korea to abide by its obligations under UN Security Council resolutions, and called for full implementation by the international community. The two countries also committed to strengthen deterrence to maintain peace and stability in the region and agreed to work together and with others to address the dangers associated with North Korea's nuclear and missile program, including the risk of proliferation. Moreover, President Biden reaffirmed the United States' commitment to the immediate resolution of the abductions issue.

In addition, Japan secured President Biden's support for Prime Minister Suga's efforts to host the Tokyo Olympics as well as cooperation on meeting demand for the manufacture and provision of COVID-19 vaccines. Prime Minister Suga mentioned the Japanese government's mission and responsibility is to revive the global economy and also create a stronger Japanese economy and society after COVID-19, stressing that "A strong Japan is a

prerequisite for a well-functioning alliance with the U.S. and the foundation for Indo-Pacific peace and prosperity.” Japan aims to repair its image which was tarnished during the COVID-19 crisis while leading the international order in the Indo-Pacific region as a strong ally of the U.S. and solidifying its commitment to rebuild its geopolitical leadership.

■ Challenges: The burden of alliance and the symbolism of the Taiwan issue

But the burden of the alliance is not light. President Biden’s choice of Japan as his first summit partner following his inauguration also means that the U.S. has high expectations for Japan’s cooperation in balancing against China. Reflecting this, it is hard to deny that most of the main points of the U.S.-Japan summit are directed at China. However, this could be seen as excessive especially in light of the strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance. In particular, the mention of the “Taiwan issue,” one of China’s most sensitive topics, is feared to provoke a backlash. But this did not stop Prime Minister Suga from responding positively to President Biden’s policy which defined China as their “most serious competitor” in a wide range of areas, including diplomacy, economy and health.

The question is whether Japan’s response to these U.S. policies is in line with Japan’s own policy toward China. Indeed, if a crisis occurs over Taiwan, it could be a major security threat for Japan. This is because when Taiwan’s problem is considered a “significant concern,” Japan will likely be required to provide rear support to the U.S. military in any contingency. The question that remains is how to prepare for such possible crises and conflicts. However, in the Suga cabinet, there is thus far no grand strategy that covers such diplomatic and security options.

Nevertheless, at the U.S.-Japan summit, Japan established itself as a partner in the U.S. strategy toward China and the establishment of a post-COVID-19 global order. Japan has also received support for efforts to secure vaccines, to host the Tokyo Olympics, and to overcome the immediate challenge of COVID-19. There is still a question about whether this

achievement is in line with the mid- to long-term diplomatic goals and visions pursued by the Suga cabinet, but it can be seen as achieving at least short-term practical benefits. It is difficult to evaluate whether this resulted from Prime Minister Suga's own diplomatic skills, but the U.S. and Japan are likely to align more closely with each other due to mutual needs. And this can be seen as more positive for Suga's cabinet which has to overcome COVID-19 this year, hold a safe Tokyo Olympics, and win two major upcoming elections.

2. Implications for Korea

The U.S.-Japan summit, which was the first summit for the Biden administration, has many implications for South Korea. Especially the ROK-U.S. summit, which is scheduled to be held in late May, is naturally compared to the U.S.-Japan summit. It will be an important test for South Korea's diplomacy. In this respect, it is believed that in-depth discussion and positioning on the following matters will be necessary:

First, it is necessary to establish South Korea's position to protect the values of "freedom" and "democracy" in the U.S.-China conflict. At the ROK-U.S. summit scheduled for May, South Korea is likely to be asked to join the U.S. policy to balance against China. Therefore, we need to consider what position we should take in the U.S.-China conflict. In an international environment where the current strategy of "strategic ambiguity" has outlived its use, equivocal attitudes could put us in a bind. However, it is not easy for South Korea to take the risk of assuming the lead in balancing against China or actively participating in the U.S.-China conflict as Japan did.

For South Korea, China's cooperation to resolve the North Korean issue and high economic links with China cannot be underestimated. Moreover, it is uncertain if South Korea has the resilience to overcome economic and security threats that may arise from balancing against China. Nevertheless, it is not realistic to take an ambiguous attitude in the U.S.-China conflict or to be independent from either great power. Therefore, the choice we must make is to

clearly express our intention to protect the values of “freedom” and “democracy,” which are the foundation of South Korea’s existence, and minimize conflicts and risks with neighboring countries while prioritizing national interests.

Second, active positions should be expressed through participation in multilateral coalitions with the aim to establish a liberal international order, including the FOIP, the Quad, and the D10. As noted, the FOIP is a regional vision centered on Japan and the United States. Also, the Biden administration values liberal democracy, solidarity with allies who share the same values, and restoration of multilateralism. Moreover, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue has become increasingly active, and the U.S. is already looking forward to South Korea joining and actively participating in it. As the U.S.-China conflict intensifies in the future, the coalition system centered on the Quad will be further strengthened.

The South Korean government’s current passive response and ambiguous stance may not be enough to respond to possible severe U.S.-China conflict in the future. Therefore, more active consideration of these regional multilateral coalitions is needed. And we must proactively and actively express our firm participation based on principles in order to strengthen the democratic and liberal regional order that we have pursued.

Third, a firm stance on cooperation among the ROK, the U.S. and Japan is needed to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. Despite the ROK-Japan and U.S.-China conflicts, the imperative for ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation is clear. In 2019, the South Korean government tried to terminate the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), a symbol of ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation. The final result was a ‘conditional extension’ and it is unlikely to be a point of dispute in the short term. However, South Korea’s position needs to be clearly expressed about this matter, because this year’s extension has the potential to cause instability. It should not be a “negotiation card” or “emotional response” to the conflict, but rather a decision that considers military and security expertise, political and diplomatic interests such as North Korea’s response to the nuclear issue, and ROK-U.S.

cooperation. In addition, the decision must be accompanied by enhancing public understanding.

The South Korean government also needs to coordinate differences with the U.S. on resolving the North Korean issue. The U.S. policy toward North Korea will be one of the main agendas at the ROK-U.S. summit. South Korea should build on cooperation with the U.S. to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. In this process, the resolution of this issue should be accompanied by a permanent peace resulting from consultations with countries such as the U.S., Japan, China, and Russia, instead of aiming for short-term achievements such as a hasty emphasis on potential U.S.-North Korea talks.

Fourth, we need to find ways to improve ROK-Japan relations without assuming that the U.S. will get directly involved. For the Biden administration, the conflict between South Korea and Japan is one of the weakest links in its alliance focus and a difficult problem to resolve. In South Korea, with the start of the Biden administration, there were many expectations for U.S. involvement to resolve the ROK-Japan dispute. However, the historical conflict between the two countries is a deeply emotional matter, and the U.S. knows from experience that its involvement will not lead to ultimate resolution as seen by the 2015 “Comfort Women” Agreement.

In this aspect, the U.S. is likely to focus on cooperative issues for ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation which are directly related to U.S. national interests rather than actively engaging in resolving the ROK-Japan dispute. Therefore, rather than passively waiting for direct U.S. involvement, there should be an active bilateral effort to overcome the conflict between the two countries on their own. It is believed that practical and tangible efforts will be needed to resolve the prolonged conflict between South Korea and Japan.

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(‘미일정상회담 평가 및 한국에의 시사점’, <http://www.asaninst.org/?p=80024>)