



## Democratic Aspirations and Strategic Realignment in Biden's Middle East Policy

2021-04(S)

Jang Ji-Hyang

Senior Fellow  
2021.03.22

Since its inauguration, the Joe Biden administration has set about reversing many of former President Donald Trump's foreign policy decisions. This has raised questions about the future direction of US Middle East policy. This *Asan Issue Brief* reviews the Biden administration's emerging Middle East policy agenda, which is based on democracy, human rights, and strengthening alliances. It then considers how South Korea's own Middle East policy aligns with the Biden administration's Middle East policy in terms of a values-based diplomatic strategy. It concludes by examining how South Korea and the United States can coordinate their engagement with Iran on renewed nuclear negotiations and foster multilateral cooperation with Israel and the United Arab Emirates in the wake of the historic Abraham Accords.

### The Biden Administration's Middle East Challenges

The Biden administration's Middle East policy aims to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which the Trump administration withdrew from, while emphasizing the values of democracy, human rights and alliances, and support for Arab-Israeli Detente. However, the policy implementation process will not be smooth. First, unlike when the Barack Obama administration negotiated with Iran on the JCPOA nuclear agreement in 2015, the Iranian regime is now led by hard-liners. The interests of the hard-liners are more aligned with exporting an anti-American Islamic Revolution across the region rather than pursuing the country's diplomatic normalization through sanctions relief.

Second, few of the United States' allies in the Middle East are model democracies. However, if violent Islamist extremist groups regain influence in the midst of weak governance and state-building failure in the post-COVID-19 era, the United States will desperately need the help of allies to organize a global coalition against terrorism while democratic standards and principles may be significantly lowered.

Third, the Abraham Accords and the Arab-Israeli strategic partnership, which was concluded through the mediation of the Trump administration at the end of 2020, were diplomatic achievements that broke the inertia of regional conflict even though they did not address the Palestinian issue as a priority. As a result, the Biden administration will keep the US embassy in Jerusalem and should be prepared to endure Palestinian criticism. In addition, the new US administration's Middle East policy faces several ongoing obstacles, including Russia's increasing regional influence, the rise of China, and the intensification of proxy civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. The strengthening of anti-US solidarity between Russia, Iran, and China will also be a serious challenge.

### **Biden's Middle East Priorities: Democracy, Human Rights, and Alliance Values**

When President Trump decided on a populist foreign policy to mobilize domestic political interests and supporters, anxious US allies in the region began to pursue strategic realignment. The United States watched on as allies such as Turkey and Qatar moved closer to Russia and Iran while the wider regional alliance system weakened. Russia seized the opportunity to oversee the end-of-war negotiations regarding its Syrian ally and its restoration as a normal state while also demonstrating its diplomatic power by mediating the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Traditional US allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia have also gradually deepened relations with China in case the United States withdraws from the Middle East. Meanwhile, China also maintains close ties with Turkey and Iran.

Furthermore, the Biden administration announced that it would gradually reduce the role of the United States in the Middle East and focus on the Indo-Pacific strategy to balance against China. As such, it may not make full efforts to implement its Middle East policy. In short, the new US administration's Middle East policy will not be effective quickly. The Trump administration declared that it was "getting out of the Middle East," unilaterally tore up the Iran nuclear deal, suddenly withdrew US troops and betrayed the Kurds in Syria, took a pro-Israeli stance, and demanded major increases in NATO defense cost-sharing. The Biden administration is likely to seek alternative options even as it also scales down its Middle East presence and focuses on China and the Indo-Pacific strategy.

### **Aligning US and ROK Middle East Policies: Values-based Diplomacy**

Nonetheless, despite the many obstacles facing the Biden administration's Middle East policy, the fact that it will be transparently and incrementally implemented based on the principles of multilateralism and democracy could be a positive signal for South Korea's own Middle East policy. This is because South Korea has emphasized middle power diplomacy by opposing nuclear proliferation, supporting democracy, and protecting human

rights in the Middle East. Befitting Korea's status in the international community, it has sought to pursue a Middle East policy in accordance with international norms, multilateralism, and humanitarian principles beyond economic interests. This policy is also necessary for securing moral authority and international support in Korean Peninsula affairs.

Furthermore, the Biden administration's emphasis on democracy and human rights in the Middle East shares the same principles as Korea's own Middle East policy of middle power diplomacy, and this will enable values-based diplomatic cooperation between the two countries on the multilateral stage. However, in bilateral relations with individual Middle Eastern countries, which have a low level of democracy, they can cooperate on policies to diversify industries, revitalize the private sector, and support reform, openness, moderate Islam, and women's rights.

### **ROK-US Coordination on Iran**

ROK-US cooperation should also be directed at the Iran nuclear deal and the negotiation process for its revival, which is of great interest to the Biden administration. In February 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken instructed his Special Envoy for Iran, Robert Malley, to form a negotiating team for a US return to the JCPOA. Malley has reportedly put together a team of officials in addition to starting consultations with the United Kingdom, France, Germany as well as Israel and the Arab Gulf States.

Given the implications of the Iranian nuclear agreement on North Korean nuclear negotiations, South Korea must exert diplomatic efforts to ensure that a roadmap for denuclearization based on the clear principle of Iran abandoning nuclear development is carried out in any negotiations. The principle of complete denuclearization should be included in any revised nuclear agreement.

It should also be pointed out that any new nuclear agreement which has been hastily rushed in order to show off diplomatic achievements may not receive strong domestic support and may be scrapped in the future. To this end, South Korea must actively promote middle power diplomacy by insisting on the principle of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East and actively support the United States in resolving the Iranian nuclear issue.

### **ROK-US Cooperation with Israel and the UAE**

Meanwhile, President Biden's support for Arab-Israeli detente could be aligned with South Korea's cooperation with the United Arab Emirates on reform and opening up projects. Since the signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain in 2020,

the key to Israeli-UAE cooperation has been to invest advanced Israeli technology into the diversification of UAE industries.

South Korea has a special strategic partnership with the UAE. Korea is the Emirates' largest construction contractor, a close economic partner on nuclear energy through the construction of the Barakah nuclear reactors, a security partner with the training deployment of Korean special forces, and is actively deepening bilateral cooperation in advanced scientific fields such as the hydrogen economy. At the same time, Korea's economic partnership with Israel is growing since the conclusion of the Korea-Israel Free Trade Agreement in December 2020 which is to take effect in early 2021.

The Abraham Accords have thus opened up opportunities for closer trilateral cooperation between Korea, Israel, and the UAE in new industries. If the Biden administration's Middle East policy seeks to gradually reduce the role of the United States in the region, South Korea could cooperate with the Arab-Israel strategic partnership to stabilize the order in the Middle East and help ROK-US cooperation.

\*This article is an English Summary of the Asan Issue Brief (2021-10).

(‘바이든 시대 중동정책의 특징과 도전’, <http://www.asaninst.org/?p=79610>)