



Prospects on Biden administration's North Korea policy: Issues, Pyongyang's response, and policy implications for ROK

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Policy direction of Biden administration's North Korea policy: Flexible, but not impatient

On April 30 (U.S. local time), the Biden administration proclaimed the outline of new direction for North Korea policy. The Biden administration's North Korea policy overview, which has been announced so far, is neither to use the Trump administration's 'grand bargain' nor the Obama administration's 'strategic patience,' but to use a flexible and practical policy toward North Korea. Although the details have yet to be released other than the general perspective, it is reasonable that there will be some consensus within the White House on the detailed approach of the new North Korea policy. The overall prediction is that the Biden administration will resume negotiations with North Korea for denuclearization, but it will have no choice but to take a phased and gradual approach rather than trying to resolve everything at once. Given the nature of the Biden administration's emphasis on diplomacy, it is unlikely to use military options, and it will first try to settle the issues at the working level through diplomacy. In this case, as it is difficult to expect a package deal at the working level, it is inevitable to deter the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons to the U.S. mainland and pursue larger goals (complete denuclearization) depending on subsequent progress.

However, Biden's government may also be concerned about the possibility of such a policy toward North Korea being attacked by 'a unilateral compromise'. First of all, resuming U.S.-North Korea dialogue with the aim of freezing North Korea's nuclear capabilities, and taking a phased approach will not only make it difficult to guarantee perfect denuclearization, but also result in acknowledging North Korea as a nuclear power. If North Korea's nuclear capability is maintained for a considerable period of time and existing international sanctions are eased and lifted, it will jeopardize the international non-

proliferation regime and negatively affect the U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations. If this happens, there is a high risk of facing Republican criticism for denouncing Trump and making more concessions to North Korea than Trump. Thus, the Biden administration will wait for the North to change its position first by bringing it back into the negotiations but not proposing excessive compensation as an alternative, while maintaining existing levels of sanctions and raising human rights issues. In a word, the core of the Biden administration's North Korea policy so far is to "take a step-by-step approach to achieving North Korea's denuclearization with time, but not give the impression that the U.S. is impatient."

After all, the core of the Biden administration's North Korea policy is the resolution of the North Korean nuclear threat, and for now, it will take a strategy of defusing the North by maintaining sanctions against it and waiting for it to turn into a compromise first. Although it has attempted diplomatic contact with North Korea since February 2021, it should be seen as a stronger paving stone to prevent the North from aggravating the situation, including its nuclear/missile moratorium violations. There is also a possibility that the U.S.-South Korea summit in May and a joint statement by South Korea and the U.S. will give positive responses to humanitarian aid to North Korea, but will actively use the new means of pressure on North Korea.

North Korea's counter-strategy: Three key words

In response, North Korea also has expressed its willingness not to lose its initiative in a fight of nerves with the U.S. North Korea strongly criticized Biden for defining North Korea's nuclear development as a 'serious threat' in a speech to Congress on April 28th and U.S. State Department spokesman's comment on Pyongyang's human rights abuses as a 'political provocation' in its statement on May 2nd. North Korea's strategy to respond to the Biden administration's policy toward North Korea is summarized into three keywords. The first is 'insulation'. Insulation, which blocks its relationship with the outside world, is a more active act than isolation -- a traditional characteristic of North Korea's diplomacy. Kim Jong-un will try to emphasize that North Korea can not only survive without compromise with the United States but also achieve economic development. Through deliberate insulation of inter-Korean relations and negotiations with the U.S., North Korea will try to get the U.S. to engage in re-negotiations with significantly compromised cards. North Korea would expect insulation to strengthen the logic of inter-Korean cooperation in South Korea or advocacy of disarmament negotiations in the United States. Of course, there

are countries that fall under the exception of this insulation, and North Korea will seek to strengthen relations with China, Russia and other socialist countries to the extent that the Covid-19 quarantine is not threatened. In particular, China is the biggest sponsor of North Korea's strategy against the U.S. and South Korea and is intended to be the last safe haven to endure sanctions against North Korea. From China's perspective, under the U.S.-China strategic competition, North Korea's presence can be a useful strategic card. North Korea will make full advantage of the fact that 2021 marks the 70th anniversary of the Treaty of Mutual Friendship and Cooperation between China and North Korea.

The second keyword of North Korea's counter-strategy is 'muddling-through.' In order for 'insulation' to work effectively, the U.S. and the international community must be given the perception that North Korea will not be hit at all by sanctions and other pressures, and that its nuclear capability will be further increased if the current situation continues. Kim Jong-un seems to be focusing on three measures: (1) Convincing North Koreans that he has a clear commitment to improving their lives and is making his own achievements under difficult economic conditions. (2) Making them proud of that North Korea's international status has been dramatically upgraded despite economic difficulties. (3) Emphasizing that the current situation is difficult, but there are signs of improvement, and that it is internal solidarity which is essential to escape from current crisis.

The third keyword is 'tailored demonstration'. In order to draw U.S. concessions in negotiations with the U.S., it must give the impression that North Korea continues to expand and strengthen its nuclear capabilities despite various restrictions. However, direct provocations or demonstrations of capabilities that cross the red line could lead to a shift toward harder-line policy from the U.S. line and a depletion of the logic behind China and Russia's support. Therefore, Kim Jong-un should avoid international criticism that he broke the deal first, while raising awareness of North Korea's nuclear capability against the United States. It can be interpreted in this context that Kim Jong-un declared the continuous development of nuclear capability and the increase of nuclear power targeting the Korean Peninsula in a statement on the 8th KWP Congress. However, the declarative measures alone had to be accompanied by substantial armed demonstrations, judging that there was a limit to obtaining concessions from the U.S., which led to the launch of cruise missiles and short-range ballistic missiles in March. While maintaining a moratorium on nuclear tests and long-range missile launches, North Korea will use other short-range missile launches, exposure to signs of actual deployment of some new short-range ballistic missiles, launching new SLBMs, and holding a launching ceremony of new submarines which can load that SLBMs. However, if the U.S.-North Korea negotiations continue to be delayed,

the possibility cannot be ruled out that North Korea will resume nuclear tests or long-range missile launches after a certain period of time, given that it should also worry about economic damage and complaints from its peoples. In this case, North Korea would first demand the immediate lifting of sanctions that cause pain to its people – for accumulating justification – and it is expected to take a strategy to turn to active demonstrations of nuclear capabilities in the second half of 2021.

Policy implication and recommendation for Seoul

For Seoul, North Korea's change is the best scenario, but it should not be overlooked that the U.S. may choose to make concessions to the North. If the U.S. chooses a large concession to North Korea first, it could be helpful for inter-Korean dialogue or exchange and cooperation, but this will be inter-Korean cooperation that has handed over the initiative by Pyongyang. In fact, North Korea, which has been recognized as a nuclear power, has no reason to treat South Korea as an equal partner. Even if the U.S. does not make any significant concessions, the resumption of U.S.-North Korea negotiations itself could be a means for North Korea to become a nuclear power. Therefore, it is rather reasonable for South Korea to emphasize the need for ROK-U.S. cooperation and common pressure to bring North Korea to denuclearization negotiations. Unless North Korea promises sincere denuclearization measures, Seoul should be emphasized that it needs to strengthen sanctions implementation and expand monitoring and detection of sanctions avoidance/violation activities, even if it does not upgrade existing sanctions. As a card to pressure North Korea, it is also necessary to ventilate the human rights issue in North Korea. In particular, moves to urge the United States to make preemptive concessions, such as taking an approach obsessed with the peace regime on the Korean Peninsula rather than denuclearization, or insisting on delaying or reducing combined exercises of U.S.-ROK alliance.

In order to promote North Korea's sincere denuclearization, the South Korea-U.S. joint preparedness must also be increased. Even if North Korea agrees to denuclearization, the complete dismantlement of its capabilities will take a considerable amount of time, and if phased denuclearization is inevitable, the period will be longer. Therefore, measures to substantialize the U.S. Extended Deterrence, which has been only rhetorically expressed at the level of the ROK-U.S. alliance, should also be implemented as soon as possible. If phased denuclearization is inevitable, it is essential to secure means to respond to North Korea's nuclear threats for a considerable period of time, which could rather reduce North

Korea's obsession with nuclear weapons. Only when measures such as forming a Nuclear Planning Group, embodying the concept of nuclear sharing, and relocating U.S. tactical nuclear weapons are actually discussed and promoted, North Korea will give up its attempts to use nuclear weapons as leverage.

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