

North Korea Policy of the U.S. and South Korea's Role

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It has been nine months since the Biden administration assumed office. Many had hoped that its January proclamation that “America is back” signalled an end to the impulsive policies of the Trump era and a beginning of consistent approach to dealing with North Korean nuclear problem. However, the hastened withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan raised questions about U.S. credibility. In South Korea, there emerged a concern that South Korea might become a second Afghanistan.

Effective foreign policy requires adequate manpower and funding. But, according to the U.S. Foreign Service Association's report, the Biden administration has so far nominated only 61 people to fill 190 ambassador posts around the world, including Japan and China. Of these nominees, only two ambassadors for Mexico and the United Nations have been formally confirmed. Meanwhile, the position of U.S. Special Envoy on North Korean Human Rights Issues is also vacant.

In South Korea's case, it has already been nine months without a U.S. ambassador in Seoul, and there is still not even a nominee. There would have been an outcry of criticism and concerns if the posts in Tokyo or Beijing had been left without even a nominee for this long. Sung Kim, who serves as the U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Policy as well as U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia, recently held consultations in Indonesia with South Korea's Special Representative Noh Kyu-duk. Having ROK-U.S. consultations on the North Korean nuclear issue not in Seoul or Washington, DC, but in Jakarta looks not normal.

Ambassador Sung Kim is a competent diplomat, but he cannot be expected to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue alone. This is an issue that requires constant communication with senior officials and related government agencies. It is hard to see how this can be effectively carried out in Indonesia. Diplomacy is not just about substance. The message that its format conveys is equally important. The current situation is concerning because it may send wrong signals to the states in the region.

In January 2020 at the Senate Armed Forces Committee hearing, General John Hyten, then-Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, “I don’t say 100 percent very often. I have 100 percent confidence in those [missile defense] capabilities against North Korea.” The Biden administration does not seem to be in a rush to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue because of its confidence in the missile defense system to control North Korean threats. It also believes that North Korea has shown no willingness to denuclearize and that dialogue for dialogue’s sake will not help much. So the Biden administration seems to have no urgency to deal with North Korean problems.

President Trump held three summits with Kim Jong Un in Singapore, Hanoi, and Panmunjom, but the Biden administration has downgraded the talks to working-level and maintains that North Korea must first demonstrate its willingness to denuclearize. Consequently, North Korea is taking its anger out on South Korea by raising the intensity of its provocations. While attending the South Korean Navy’s test of a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) in late September, President Moon Jae-in said that “the reinforcement of our missile capabilities can be a clear deterrent to North Korea’s provocations.” Less than four hours later, Kim Yo Jong, Deputy Department Director of Workers’ Party of Korea, released a statement directly criticizing President Moon, stating that “As the President of a country, he must carefully consider everything he says and does.” A few days later when North Korea tested a hypersonic missile, South Korea could only “express regret.” Unable to even utter the word “provocation” any more, as the word “gaslighting” implies it raises concerns about how much the North controls the South’s mindset.

North Korea's intention to develop nuclear weapons is not to attack the United States or Japan. It is to justify its three-generation hereditary succession regime and ultimately achieve unification of the Korean Peninsula under communist flag. Very unfortunately, as of today, China and Russia seems to support North Korea’s objective. While the United States is located beyond the vast Pacific Ocean, South Korea is the only liberal democracy left on the eastern rim of the vast Eurasian continent, and the cult of one-man rule in North Korea, China, and Russia are trying to turn South Korea into totalitarian system like themselves. Under this situation, what can South Korea do?

South Korea must do everything it can to defend itself against North Korea's military threats. In May, the presidents of South Korea and the United States promised to strengthen the alliance’s deterrence posture and agreed on the importance of maintaining joint military readiness. This essence of agreement should extend to strengthening South Korea’s missile capabilities. It is better to terminate the “Three No’s” agreement with China (no additional deployment of U.S. missile defense systems, no participation in a U.S.-led missile defense

network, and no trilateral military alliance with the United States and Japan). South Korea should pursue regular, rotational deployment of U.S. strategic assets stationed in Japan and Guam to South Korea, such as stealth bombers and fighter jets as well as nuclear-powered submarines.

South Korea and the United States should also establish a Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), a consultative body to decide the deployment and use of nuclear weapons like the one of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In 1991, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. President George. H. W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev announced that the United States would withdraw 6,000 tactical nuclear weapons deployed in the Western Pacific, including 600 in South Korea. Since nuclear weapons can only be deterred by nuclear weapons and that North Korea is a de-facto nuclear state, at least 10% of these nuclear weapons should be re-deployed.

As seen in the cases of Vietnam and Afghanistan, alliances lacking trust among themselves cannot last long. When it comes to the Korean Peninsula, strengthening the ability to respond to North Korean nuclear threats through the ROK-U.S. alliance is the answer. South Korea must give the United States confidence that it is doing everything possible to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea.

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