

## **How to Go Together with the Biden Administration**

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Mr. Joe Biden of the Democratic Party has won the US presidential election. President Trump has taken a showmanship approach to North Korea stating that Chairman Kim Jong Un is ‘very smart,’ and that “I am the only one that knows and I am the only one he deals with.” In contrast, President-elect Biden has stressed the importance of alliances and the need to actually denuclearize North Korea.

As the inauguration of the Biden administration approaches, it is necessary for South Korea to examine whether it is ready to ‘go together’ with the new America. Biden has previously criticized Trump for granting legitimacy to a ‘thug’ and stated that there should be no further summit meetings until North Korea takes effective steps towards denuclearization.

While Biden has attacked Trump’s trade war with China as ‘reckless,’ on the whole, he has maintained a critical view of China’s political and economic behavior. Bearing in mind that the Obama administration’s Pivot to Asia sought to counter China’s rise, there is a strong likelihood that the Biden administration will pursue a China policy that is outwardly soft but nonetheless more sophisticated in its approach.

Even as South Korea responded positively to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, it has expressed reservations about relevant US proposals. The building of an alliance network in the Asia-Pacific began during the Obama administration. The Trump administration has also emphasized the Indo-Pacific Strategy and Quad-Plus.

During the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, even though no Soviet nuclear warheads were deployed, Americans were terrified and President John F. Kennedy vowed a determined response in his T.V. address to the American people. Not long after, the Soviet Union withdrew its missiles from Cuba. Given the fact that North Korea has enshrined its status as a nuclear weapons state in its constitution and the Workers’ Party Platform adopted the line of simultaneous nuclear weapons and economic development, it may not be long before North Korea expects that the

long-awaited conditions necessary for a North-led unification are achieved. South Korea's current security situation is incomparably worse than that of the United States in 1962, yet South Korea's overall level of security sensitivity has declined and it is hard to find any sign of serious efforts in seeking effective ways to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem.

When the South Korean government's special envoys visited Pyongyang in March 2018, Kim Jong Un said that he would give up his nuclear weapons if the United States can offer a security guarantee for the Kim regime and removed the military threat. But this was a roundabout way of calling for the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea and terminating the ROK-US alliance as a precondition for denuclearization. Since then, the South Korean government has portrayed itself as a mediator in the North Korean nuclear issue, hoping that scaling back or cancelling ROK-US military exercises in accordance with North Korean demands will lead Kim Jong Un to give up his nuclear arsenal. This plays into North Korea's longstanding claim that it developed nuclear weapons to counter the threat posed by the US. Continuing to agree with North Korea's propaganda may lead to the conclusion that the withdrawal of US forces resolves all problems. The problem of this kind of logic is that it can end with the "Vietnamization of the Korean Peninsula."

Tired of North Korea's repeated broken promises, US Democrats' views of North Korea have hardened. Now that the continental United States is within reach of North Korea's nuclear weapons, their policies will differ from the past. The incoming Biden administration will pursue working-level talks aimed at obtaining effective measures of North Korean denuclearization and implementation steps as well as rigorous verification.

In the event that North Korea does not change its stance, the US is likely to implement tougher measures ranging from stricter implementation of the UN Security Council sanction resolutions to an expansion of secondary boycotts against companies and individuals that are involved in trade with North Korea. Given that it was the Obama administration that pushed for the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system, the Biden administration is also likely to pursue the strengthening of military readiness.

If South Korea continues to maintain the same North Korea policy that it had during the Trump era, there are concerns that the Biden administration will see South Korea as a 'mediator' that has lost its sense of balance. At a time when both China and North Korea have the same goal of removing US forces from the Korean Peninsula, South Korea's fixation on the value of 'self-reliance' and an early transition of wartime operational control could lead the US to question whether South Korea actually needs the US. The US may see South Korea as a country lacking

sound judgement, without the ability nor the will to protect itself and engages in wishful thinking rather than a cool-headed assessment of the reality.

If the US cannot trust South Korea as an ally, it can choose to go its own way. Consider what might happen when arms control experts in the Biden team take up key posts in the new administration. Prioritizing the safety of the United States, they will emphasize ‘arms control negotiations’ with North Korea to limit further improvements in its nuclear capabilities rather than seek denuclearization. As their influence grows, the ROK-US alliance will deteriorate and denuclearization as a goal will fade. China and Russia are dominating the vast Eurasian continent and steadfastly supporting North Korea. If the ROK-US alliance, which is formed by the two countries across the Pacific, weakens against this backdrop, the South Korea’s survival and prosperity will be in extreme danger.

Allies can have different views, and as partners they can judiciously calibrate those views and seek alternatives. The question is how such a dialogue takes place. Some contend that South Korea should seek to explain its North Korea policy to the incoming Biden administration and gain its understanding. This approach might work if the Biden team knew not much about Korean affairs. But those who will occupy key positions in the incoming administration are hardly new hands. Most of the key foreign and security policy figures in the Biden team were involved in Korean Peninsula issues under the Obama administration. They know well how the South Korean government has thought and acted.

Recognizing the reality that South Korea is facing an unprecedented crisis and that South Korea is the targeted victim of North Korean nuclear threat, South Korea must wisely proceed in a cool-headed manner rather than rely on vague hope. The government must formulate its foreign policy based on the consensus of its people. Only then will the Biden administration listen to South Korea’s views and South Korea and the US can ‘go together.’

\* The view expressed herein does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies