



A NEW ADMINISTRATION: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SEOUL AND THE US ALLIANCE

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The following is the sixth and final part of a post-election series on the impact of the Biden administration on US relations in the Indo-Pacific. Visit [here](#) for part one, [here](#) for part two, [here](#) for part three, [here](#) for part four, and [here](#) for part five.

While significant attention has been paid to how the incoming Biden administration is likely to reset Washington's North Korea policy, South Korea should see also this window as an opportunity to reconfiguring its foreign policy paradigm for the post-Covid world.

Notwithstanding the severity of the North Korean nuclear threat, South Korea also faces unparalleled geopolitical, geoeconomic, and transnational challenges. As critical as the North Korean nuclear issue is, parallel forces are going to reverberate throughout the 2020s. Moreover, South Korea must bridge the left-right political division that makes a

national security consensus impossible as it weakens South Korea's leverage regionally and globally.

As the US-China rivalry intensifies, South Korea must forge a new foreign policy that employs its growing political, military, economic, cultural, and technological assets as "force multipliers" rather than continuing to stress the notion of a perennially weak underdog in a dangerous neighborhood.

Progressives supported Trump's readiness to engage Kim Jong Un while conservatives were deeply troubled by his more casual approach to an alliance that is critical to Korea's national security. Both groups were offended by his transactional approach to the relationship and his demands for money to sustain a relationship born of shared sacrifice and shared values.

Trump's departure will dissolve the glue that united South Korea's right and left (temporarily and tenuously) but it also affords Seoul an opportunity to reorient its foreign policy in ways that could maximize its leverage with Washington and other key nations. That shift will take courage and creativity and requires a different mindset from the current focus that puts nearly all its diplomatic chips on a breakthrough with North Korea.

While managing relations with China and dealing with the North Korean nuclear threat are two of the main Asian security challenges facing the new administration, President-elect Joe Biden would be well-served to compare notes with ROK President Moon Jae-in. The two men face similar domestic challenges: managing deep and perhaps permanent political polarization, publics that feel increasingly marginalized despite overall economic success, and public support for an alliance that is challenged by a very vocal minority. Foreign policy concerns are also similar: China and North Korea dominate both leaders' agendas.

There's a temptation to let partisanship shape assessments of the alliance or for caricatures to dominate thinking. The left deems alliance advocates to be warmongers, determined to crush North Korea or keep the peninsula divided. Conservatives in South

Korea and the US write off the Moon administration as naïve about North Korea and blind to Chinese intentions. In fact, there is strong support for the alliance throughout the ROK political spectrum (despite small but vocal numbers of opponents). Opinion polls continue to show stratospheric (90%) support for the alliance among the ROK public.

Conservative governments in South Korea rightly stressed the central importance of the US-ROK alliance. While understanding the need for engagement with North Korea, they continue to stress, for example, that scaling down or postponing crucial US-South Korea military exercises weakens deterrence and defense. Progressive administrations retort that defense spending increases occurred under their watch and despite different approaches to North Korea, key achievements such as the KORUS FTA were signed under the Roh Moo-hyun administration.

Like other US allies and partners, Seoul understands the shift in Washington's approach toward Beijing. While Trump's erratic foreign policy, amateurish outreach to Kim, and lack of appreciation for military preparedness in the US-ROK alliance was perceived by South Korean conservatives with alarm, most foreign policy experts in South Korea expect Biden to retain a hardline posture toward Pyongyang as well.

South Koreans know well that Beijing is a revisionist power and is quick to punish those who defy it. Three years have not eased the bitterness created by Beijing's attempts to punish them after Seoul agreed to deploy the THAAD (terminal high-altitude area defense) anti-missile system after North Korea's 2016 nuclear test over Chinese objections. But South Koreans also feel that their ally did not appreciate their hardship. Given this experience, Trump's demand for a 500% increase in support for the US military presence wasn't just shocking, it was an insult.

South Koreans also know that China is a fact of life. The two economies cannot be decoupled – China has long been South Korea's number one trade partner. Moreover, South Korea doesn't have the luxury of distance like other US allies such as Australia or even Japan. Among the many countries sharing borders with China, Korea was a key frontline state that

suffered the most from dynastic changes in the Middle Kingdom and Korea's struggle to maintain a modicum of autonomy. PRC support for North Korea also means that South Korea can't ignore China.

South Korea stands out among US allies because it arguably faces the most pressure from both the US and China. At the same time, no US ally has such a long history of relations with China. South Korea is the only country in the Asian mainland where the US maintains ground forces—a not insignificant fact given the growing need for the US to counterbalance China's expanding strategic weight.

President Moon wants Biden to focus on dialogue with North Korea and normalizing US-North Korea relations. This is understandable but too much emphasis on engineering a breakthrough with North Korea will face resistance. But the North Korean nuclear threat today co-exists with growing anxiety in the US on an increasingly assertive if not aggressive China. These two issues can no longer be separated. This complicates South Korea's strategic calculus as never before since Washington obviously places the highest priority on counterbalancing China.

The ROK's central task is rebuilding a national security consensus that stands on three pillars: a redefined regional (and global) role, longer-term defense modernization and improvement strategies; and a modernized alliance with the US. South Korea can't escape the fallout from intensifying great power competition but it must emphasize policies that create strategic opportunities outside the Korean Peninsula.

Remaining mindful of the North Korean threat, then, Seoul must expand its foreign policy aperture, extricate itself from a zero-sum North Korean silo (or the belief that only constant engagement with Pyongyang really matters), and focus on areas where it can address Biden administration priorities, such as pandemic responses, climate change, regional trade talks or reform of multilateral institutions.

Especially important is new thinking about the alliance. This demands reassessment throughout South Korea's political spectrum. For all the complaints about the left, the right also needs

perestroika or new thinking. Allied capabilities have changed, as has Asia. The left must see that South Korea's national security interests can't be defined by Seoul's accommodation of Pyongyang's demands.

One important element in this process is a new relationship with Japan. While Seoul and Tokyo must do the heavy lifting, the US should be engaged as well. Tokyo and Seoul should try to shield their bilateral policies as much as possible from deeply entrenched political instincts so that both can maximize returns from smarter cooperation and collaboration. After all, South Korea and Japan face the same demographic nightmare: the world's fastest declining populations due to falling birth rates, and the fastest aging populations. Political courage on both sides is essential if Tokyo and Seoul want to move beyond the status quo.

The pandemic has shown dramatically why business as usual no longer works for any country, especially strategically consequential middle powers such as South Korea. International security is no longer dominated by hard power threats. North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile threats must be addressed diplomatically and militarily but Seoul must also take full advantage of an emerging new world order where smart power is going to be much more relevant and important. Covid-19 has shown that to survive and prosper in the post-pandemic world, a country must have credible resilience, critical ties with the world including sustainable supply chains, and a global worldview.

Under Biden and Moon, Seoul and Washington should seize the opportunity to reset the alliance for the post-Covid world. Both will gain significant benefits if they do, even as they work together to ensure North Korea's denuclearization.

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