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Biden's North Korea Policy : Alliance Transformation before Denuclearization

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Introduction

Diplomacy with North Korea has always been an intractable challenge for the United States. After the collapse of the Six Party Talks in 2008, the United States attempted several different approaches with the same goal of North Korea's denuclearization. Obama administration's "strategic patience", while ultimately ineffective, reflected hard-learned lessons of decades of North Korea's broken promises. The Trump administration that followed faced series of serious North Korean provocations from the moment it inaugurated. In response, it formulated the "maximum pressure and engagement" approach, which paid an unprecedented level of attention to North Korea. Now, the newly inaugurated Biden administration has finalized its own North Korea policy review and shared the results with U.S. allies. Only broad sketches of the new policy trickled out so far and additional facets of the policy are only being inferred from the statements issued at the G7 meeting in London and US-ROK summit. Overall, the reaction to the policy review has been underwhelming, as many observers correctly perceive it to be vague and lacking in originality.

While Biden's North Korea policy is unambiguous in its stated goal, namely the Complete, Verifiable, Irreversible Abandonment of North Korea's nuclear weapons, or CVIA, it is vague when it comes to actual details on how such a seemingly impossible goal could be achieved. Perhaps this vagueness is a subterfuge: the policy review is supposed to communicate American intentions about North Korea to allies, stakeholders, and Kim Jong Un himself. But fleshing out policy details could

allow North Korea to anticipate Biden administration's moves and prolong the impasse. After all, taking advantage of the short political cycles of its opponents is Pyongyang's forte.¹

But available evidence indicates that Biden's North Korea policy is more of a strategy to manage alliance relations with South Korea and entice it to embrace U.S.'s Indo-Pacific strategy. It reflects the fact that North Korea is no longer a top policy priority for the United States in the era of great power competition. The re-orientation of North Korea policy away from its namesake is the product of Biden administration officials' skepticism over North Korea's denuclearization prospects², as well as the assessment that Trump's personal diplomacy with North Korea has been fruitless³. But the real game changer is the fact that U.S. strategic focus has shifted from counterterrorism and rogue states such as North Korea and Iran to confronting near peer adversaries, particularly China.

It is the latter objective that is driving Biden administration's foreign policy, which has been inherited from Trump administration's National Security Strategy of 2017, but with an important twist. One of the key differences between Trump and Biden administrations lies with the respective administrations' views of alliance. While Trump famously regarded U.S. allies as free-riders, Biden rightly sees them as "force multipliers"⁴ that support the United States around the world. U.S. military couldn't possibly agree more, given that it considers alliances and partnerships to be the "backbones of global security"⁵.

With the military and political leadership finally in full agreement on the strategic direction of the United States, the Biden administration is forging ahead at full speed to revitalize and reorient the alliance for the era of great power competition. Biden's North Korea policy should be interpreted in this light rather than as a standalone policy specific to North Korea.

While the policy is arguably devoid of new ideas, it serves as a device to firmly anchor South Korea in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy in exchange for Biden's commitment to prioritize dialogue with North Korea over the military alternative. In a word, what lies at the core of Biden's North Korea policy is not the namesake target but the alliance- not only South Korea and the United States, but a triad that includes Japan.

The restoration of deterrence to the center of North Korea policy by the Biden administration is a welcome change from the chaotic diplomacy of the Trump era. The lowered prioritization of denuclearization is influenced by the perception that North Korea is unlikely to abandon its nuclear arsenal and the quiet assessment that North Korea's nuclear and missile threats can be fully deterred, leading to a lessening of urgency for dialogue with Pyongyang. As a result, North Korea is likely to perceive Biden's North Korea policy to be a return to the strategic patience of the Obama era.

Biden's North Korea policy also challenges Seoul. The alliance relation has been restored, but is also transformed. South Korea will now have to reassess its own approach to North Korea and China within the Indo-Pacific strategy framework rather than striking an independent path. Therein lies the complexity and challenges of Biden's North Korea policy for South Korea.

Biden's North Korea Policy: A Platform for Alliance Management

Words of the completion of the North Korea policy review started to filter out by late April, when the Washington Post reported the Biden administration's North Korea policy review had been completed. Later, the White House spokesperson Jen Psaki confirmed the completion of the policy review while elaborating little. Given that it is unlikely Biden administration "will detail [its] diplomatic strategy in public"⁶, one is left to surmise it based on the public statements from official press briefings and diplomatic gatherings.

The trickling out of policy details culminated in the ROK-US Summit Joint Statement⁷ on May 21st. The section on North Korea in the joint statement can be considered as the most complete description of the Biden administration's North Korea policy made available to the public. In it, the United States reiterates the "calibrated and practical approach" and openness to diplomacy. South Korea's request to build the policy on the US-North Korea and inter-Korean agreements of the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration and Singapore Joint Statement was fully reflected, as well as the use of the term "complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula". Given that the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration includes a provision⁸ to pursue trilateral meetings with the two Koreas and the United States or quadrilateral ones including China aiming at replacing the armistice with a permanent

peace regime, the Biden administration's acceptance of the Panmunjom Declaration can be interpreted as the latter's endorsement of the end-of-war declaration implied in the provision. In addition, Biden did not completely shut out the possibility of sitting down with Kim Jong Un, albeit with preconditions that are anathema to Kim's regime.

The Biden administration, having conceded to the South Korean government on the engagement aspect of its North Korea policy, gained back much more on arguably more critical matters. Moon administration, which has long been reticent about bringing up North Korea's human right abuses, agreed to work together to improve the human rights situation in North Korea. The South Korean administration also acknowledged the "fundamental importance of US-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation" in not only addressing North Korean issues, but also in protecting and securing prosperity, shared values, and the rules-based international order. This is perhaps Moon's most tacit acknowledgement to date of the trilateral security cooperation with Japan and the United States, while undermining his promise to the Chinese president Xi Jinping not to establish a trilateral military alliance with the United States and Japan, which was one of the "three no's" agreed with China in 2017⁹. Thus, the Biden administration created a basis for cooperation between its two key Asian allies and gained a tacit South Korean commitment to the US's Indo-Pacific strategy.

The fact that the U.S.- ROK joint statement shows "quid pro quo" between Seoul and Washington reveals the core use of Biden administration's North Korea policy. Instead of focusing entirely on North Korea's denuclearization, a rather thankless task with a low probability of success, Biden administration has instead leveraged its policy process to restore and upgrade alliance relations in East Asia. The new policy has demonstrated its utility when both South Korea and Japan welcomed the outcome of the administration's North Korea policy review. The fact that these two countries, which maintain diametrically opposite policies towards North Korea from each other, accepted Biden's North Korea policy without much misgiving is a testament to the policy's flexibility¹⁰.

The policy's flexibility paradoxically lies with its vagueness. South Korea's perception of the policy is it represents a continuation of engagement efforts from Trump's era. For Japan, it is about deterrence and North Korea's complete denuclearization. The content of the new North Korea

policy will be determined by future North Korean actions, as provocations will result in heightened deterrence and sanctions while dialogue will be reciprocated.

But how about North Korea proper? The lack of substance and details in Biden's North Korea policy is not the result of indifference. In part it reflects the fruitlessness of conducting diplomacy with North Korea, but is also the result of the ongoing reassessment of U.S. strategic thinking for the region. Thus, the perceived vagueness follows from the loss of specificity in the U.S. North Korea policy, which will be increasingly driven by the defense considerations outlined in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

Alliance (and America) First

As mentioned above, Biden administration is nominally committed to the goal of complete, verifiable, irreversible abandonment of North Korea's nuclear weapons. But without a clear diplomatic pathway towards North Korea's denuclearization, the policy void will inevitably be filled by developments in the military domain, which is focused on deterrence against China. As the United States shifts the focus of its grand strategy from counterterrorism and rogue states such as North Korea and Iran to great power competition with China, U.S.'s North Korea policy will inevitably reflect elements of the administration's Indo-Pacific strategy, especially in terms of establishing a region wide security framework to check China's rise. Such a move will benefit the defense posture of the Korean peninsula, for instance by enhancing ISR (Intelligence-Surveillance-Reconnaissance) capability across the region. But it would also subordinate North Korea policy to the larger Indo-Pacific strategy.

The shift in the strategic focus to near peer competitors was adopted as the U.S. security strategy by the Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) document. Ideas outlined in the NSS was subsequently operationalized through the 2018 National Defense Strategy by the Department of Defense. The Biden administration has inherited much of its predecessor's views and priorities, but with an important twist: the central focus of Trump's National Security Strategy was to counter China and Russia but relying almost entirely on the sole military might of the United States. In contrast, Biden administration takes a more holistic approach that combines traditional

military hard power with American diplomacy and soft power¹¹ to counter an expanded set of threats, including climate change and authoritarian populism.

Biden's acknowledgment of non-traditional global challenges such as COVID-19 and anti-democratic governments by no means implies dilution of the Trumpian focus on great power competition, which remains as the most significant challenge to the United States. What changed was not the perception of the threat, but how to confront it.

Biden's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG), which provides strategic guidance for the U.S. government until the administration releases its own National Security Strategy later in the year or early next year, recognizes the threats to America's security is now both diffuse and persistent, and to counter them requires subtle diplomatic touch and allies' cooperation more than Trump was ever willing to acknowledge. If Trump aimed to "preserve peace through strength" by going America first, Biden reaffirmed the fundamental necessity of allies and partners by earnestly acknowledging that the United States cannot achieve its strategic priorities without first reinvigorating and modernizing alliances and partnerships (INSSG, pg. 10).

It is well known that during the Trump presidency there was significant tension between the White House and the rest of the national security apparatus of the U.S. government regarding the role of allies in ensuring the security of the country¹². With Biden declaring alliances and partnerships to be essential for the United States, the Trump era's National Defense Strategy and Indo-Pacific Strategy Report that emphasized the importance of alliances and partnerships in the face of presidential disapproval, were finally on the same page as the vision of the White House incumbent.

The restoration of the alliance to the center of the U.S. foreign policy under the new strategic thinking of great power competition does not imply a return to the pre-Trump U.S. foreign policy. Rather, it means a fundamental transformation of alliance relations. Whereas before alliance was seemingly an end in itself for the United States, now it has acquired a clear, pragmatic purpose: protect and strengthen U.S. influence and interests in areas of geostrategic competition.

Deterrence against China before Denuclearization of North Korea

With the unity of vision and strategy under the Biden administration, United States is redoubling its efforts to make existing alliances more coherent and effective for the great power competition. The focus is especially intense in the Asia-Pacific region, which is U.S. military's "priority theatre". Biden administration's diplomacy is responding swiftly to incorporate these priorities into policy.

President Biden's first two in-person summits were with his counterparts from Japan and South Korea, respectively. The joint statements issued after each summit strongly reflected the defense priorities and strategic directions of the United States. In the case of U.S.-Japan joint statement, it stated "... to deepen defense cooperation across all domains, including cyber and space, and to bolster extended deterrence."¹³ Likewise for the U.S.-ROK joint statement, at the very first substantial paragraph following the introduction, the two sides agreed "...to deepen cooperation in other domains, including cyber and space, to ensure an effective joint response against emerging threats."¹⁴

These declarations echo the 2018 National Defense Strategy as well as the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, in which the U.S. army's future warfare concept of Multi-Domain Operations, or MDO, was officially acknowledged. MDO, also known as All Domain Operations, is a warfighting concept that is aimed at extending the battlespace that the U.S. military must contest from the traditional geographic domains of air, land, and sea, to cyberspace and the outer space, as well as the electromagnetic spectrum, and defeat the adversary as a joint force. Similar joint, all domain warfighting concepts are being developed by other branches of the U.S. military. The Air Force version of MDO is called the Joint All Domain Operations (JADO), the version developed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff is called Joint Warfighting Concept (JWC), and the Navy is currently developing its own version of MDO called Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO).

The common theme across all these concepts, of which Army's MDO is the most representative, is defeating China's (and Russia's) anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) as well as its gray zone strategies. China's A2/AD strategy is centered around its massive surface-to-air and anti-ship ballistic missile capabilities¹⁵, and forms the basis for the denial capability against the U.S. military presence in the

Indo-Pacific region. MDO envisages an anti-A2/AD strategy, which by outcompeting opponents through information dominance and long-range strike capabilities in all domains of air, land, sea, cyber, space, and the electromagnetic spectrum, would give the U.S. forces the ability to penetrate Chinese and Russian defenses and systematically eliminate threats located deep behind the enemy lines¹⁶.

So how do U.S. allies fit in the overall MDO scheme? Although there is yet to be an official position in this regard, that in addition to interoperability, U.S. military is especially keen on allies' providing "access, permissions and authorities that are critical to the Joint Force's ability to operate in the poorly defined competitive space"¹⁷ for the full exploitation of the advantages that MDO would confer. In practice, this would mean that allies would provide the U.S. military with "force multiplier" effect by expanding the maneuvering space for the U.S. forces to strike the opponents from all quarters. In a nutshell, what the U.S. military is aiming to achieve through MDO is to create a more agile and flexible force that is backed by interoperable allies, maximizing "detrability" against near peer adversaries¹⁸.

This development has important implications for South Korea. If previously the principal purpose of ROK-U.S. alliance was to provide trip-wire deterrence against North Korea, MDO would reorient the alliance's deterrence posture to include both North Korea and China. MDO requires a tighter integration between South Korean and U.S. forces through maximum interoperability and readiness, and it will be sufficiently flexible to incorporate Japan and other U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific theater. The tight integration of the allied forces will not only be effective against North Korea but also China.

MDO is already transforming the ROK-US alliance into a flexible security structure that reaches beyond the peninsula. The USFK commander Gen. Paul LaCamera essentially confirmed the off-peninsula missions of the U.S. forces in South Korea in his response to advance policy questions for his Senate confirmation hearing in May. His official response stated that USFK "are uniquely positioned to provide the Commander [of the Indo-Pacific Command] a range of capabilities that create options for supporting out-of-area contingencies and responses to regional threats"¹⁹, in clear reference to strategic flexibility. At the same hearing, Gen. LaCamera also expressed his intention

to induce tighter security coordination between South Korea and Japan and leverage MDO trainings for this end²⁰.

In the meantime, South Korea and the United States are diverging in threat perception. South Korea is still overwhelmingly focused on North Korea's nuclear threat, whereas the United States is shifting its strategic focus in Northeast Asia from North Korea to China. Underlying this shift in focus is the growing U.S. perception that North Korea is a threat that is under control: Gen. John Hyten, the Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated in 2020 that he had 100% confidence U.S. military would be able to intercept any missile launched by North Korea²¹. More recently, the commander of U.S. Strategic Command, Adm. Charles Richard, publicly expressed his confidence in the U.S. military's ability to fully deter North Korea's nuclear threat. His confidence regarding North Korea contrasted with his view on the Chinese nuclear capability, which he believed had hit an "inflection point" and was rapidly expanding²².

The remarks by Generals Hyten and Richard imply that the United States has "contained" North Korea's nuclear threat, and Biden administration's North Korea policy, which has not outlined a concrete denuclearization roadmap, likely reflects such assessment. But many in Seoul have the opposite perception of North Korea's nuclear capability²³ and would interpret recent changes in the U.S. strategic direction, which is driven by the combination of Indo-Pacific strategy, Multi-Domains Operations, and strategic flexibility of USFK, as giving more priority to confronting China at the expense of North Korean denuclearization. Without a detailed plan to reassure South Korea in the face of growing North Korean nuclear threat, there could be plenty of daylight between the two allies.

Conclusion

Overall, Biden's North Korea policy is a corollary to the current U.S. strategy of great power competition, and aspects of Biden's North Korea policy descend directly from the Indo-Pacific strategy and the Biden White House's own INSSG. At a time when growing rivalry with China is permeating every facet of global economy, politics, and technology, focusing on North Korea would be a distraction for the United States.

Biden's North Korea policy is a flexible policy platform that achieves several important goals for the United States by paradoxically not addressing its namesake target. Cognizant that diplomacy with North Korea is a divisive issue not only within South Korea but also between Seoul and Tokyo and even Washington and Seoul, the vagueness of Biden's North Korea policy allows itself to be "flexibly" interpreted by South Korea and Japan to suit their respective political and strategic needs.

In exchange, the United States demanded and obtained from South Korea several key concessions that bind the latter to the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Following Japan's footsteps, Seoul committed to cooperate with the United States on "all domains", which echoes the U.S. military initiative to defeat China's A2/AD strategy. South Korea also committed to strengthening trilateral cooperation with Japan, and the reference to stability in the Taiwan strait was icing on the cake. None of these is good news for China.

Ironically, this was made possible only because North Korea, steadfast in its goal of being acknowledged as a nuclear weapons state, has precluded all meaningful attempts at dialogue, thereby rendering diplomacy pointless. Moon administration's initiatives, which for better or worse could have been major turning points for North Korea if realized, have fizzled out because of North Korea's lack of reciprocity. Biden then simply moved in and filled the void in the diplomatic space with a deterrence strategy, making use of well-established security relationship with South Korea.

As North Korea has become an ancillary matter in the grander Indo-Pacific strategy, it creates a conundrum for Kim Jong Un: as the United States has lowered the priority for denuclearization in favor of deterrence, North Korea's threat of provocation no longer creates urgency for action in Washington. This has in effect neutralized a major psychological leverage that North Korea possessed over the United States.

Despite what could be considered as a strategic setback, the road ahead for Kim Jong Un is nonetheless straightforward: aware that the United States does not favor dialogue, Kim will regard Biden's North Korea policy as a repeat of the policy of strategic patience and will respond by simply placing more effort into completing the strategy of mass production of nuclear weapons.

Such a strategy was successful once in the past: instead of being flummoxed by U.S. indifference, North Korea inched closer to full nuclear capability at a pace of its own choosing during Obama's presidency, and struck the United States with a series of nuclear and missile provocations at the tail end of the tenure. As a sign that it is biding for time, North Korea may limit its future provocations to the ones that are directed at South Korea rather than the United States until it feels confident that the United States can no longer ignore its expanded nuclear and missile capabilities.

South Korea is also facing the prospect of a major transformation in alliance relations, perhaps more so than any other U.S. ally. First, Indo-Pacific strategy means the weight of U.S. security policy in Asia will shift from its traditional focus on Northeast Asia to a much wider area that stretches from South Asia to the Northeast. Strategic flexibility for USFK is therefore a must for the U.S. military. MDO's demand for high interoperability between South Korean and U.S. forces means South Korean capabilities, especially in cyberspace and electromagnetic spectrum, will form part of U.S. deterrence posture against China.

South Korea should not simply content itself with the restoration of alliance under Biden. Although the uncertainty over the U.S. security guarantee has lifted, the alliance was restored with a complex set of demands on South Korea. In response, South Korea should meet U.S. demands of high level of joint interoperability and strategic flexibility for USFK by beefing up its own deterrence capabilities. For instance, the integration of South Korea's command and control network - the Korean Joint Command and Control System (KJCCS)²⁴ - with the future command and control network that forms the core of MDO concept, the Joint All Domain Command and Control (JADC2), will enhance interoperability with the U.S. missile defense system and greatly strengthen deterrence against North Korean missiles. But all these measures are likely to raise Chinese opposition and criticism. South Korea should therefore ready itself for heightened diplomatic friction with its neighbor.

A much more pressing challenge is addressing the emerging perception gap over North Korea's nuclear threat between the two allies. Seoul should make it clear to Washington that mere containment of North Korea's nuclear capability is woefully inadequate, and demand a detailed set of reassurance measures, such as preparing the Combined Forces Command to respond to North

Korea's nuclear use, demonstrating firm U.S. commitment to extended deterrence, and if necessary, deploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea²⁵.

The United States and South Korea face an adversary that is militarily confident yet economically desperate, and can easily escalate a minor border skirmish to a nuclear crisis. The peculiarities and dangers of North Korea remain unchanged, and appropriate strategic provisions should be made by the two allies beyond the alliance transformation.

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