



Online Series

2020. 11. 11. | CO 20-29

The Biden Administration's Policy on the Korean Peninsula and ROK's Response

Cho, Han-Bum

(Senior Research Fellow, Unification Policy Research Division)

The foreign policy of the Biden administration will emphasize reclaiming America's global leadership and restoring alliances. Uncertainty regarding the US-South Korea alliance is also expected to be substantially resolved. The Biden administration, assuming that North Korea is sincere about denuclearization, is expected to pursue incremental negotiations with North Korea on denuclearization that are prepared from the bottom up. Efforts to transform the election of the Biden administration into a window of opportunity for the Korean Peninsula peace process are imperative.

America's Return to Internationalism

With the election victory of the Democratic Party's candidate for President Joseph R. Biden Jr., changes to America's foreign policy are expected which will undoubtedly impact the Korean Peninsula and East Asia. The difference between the foreign policies of President Trump and President-elect Biden can be defined by the contrast between isolationism and internationalism. Isolationism is an approach to foreign policy that stipulates that the US can ill-afford to exert its power to assume a global leadership role in maintaining the international order and should instead focus on its national interests. On the other hand, internationalism asserts that the US should

exercise its leadership as a great power to strengthen the international order as it is in their best interests to do so.

America's global status has relatively declined compared to the past due to the emergence of a multipolar world with the end of bipolar competition between the US and the Soviet Union as well as the rise of China. President Trump's 'America First' foreign policy was instrumental to his election victory in 2016. Since its inauguration, the Trump administration has exhibited isolationist tendencies by fostering distrust among its allies, reducing America's role at international organizations, and withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accord. The Trump administration viewed alliances transactionally from an economic perspective and limited America's involvement in international conflicts. America First was, in reality, closer to 'Trump first' in that President Trump prioritized his personal political accomplishments and failed to reflect traditional Republican values by overlooking the importance of national security and alliance partnerships. In many regards, the Trump administration has decoupled from the Republican party. Former President George W. Bush and late Senator John McCain publicly criticized President Trump, and several high-ranking officials and cabinet members including Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and FBI Director James Comey all resigned after opposing the administration's policies.

President-elect Biden has denounced President Trump's isolationist foreign policy, claiming that "America first has made America alone" during a presidential town hall hosted by ABC in Philadelphia on October 15. Consequently, the Biden administration will likely pursue an internationalist foreign policy and promote international cooperation on common global values. President-elect Biden had previously announced that he would "be a president who will stand with our allies and friends" during his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in August, and he reaffirmed America's global leadership role in his victory speech on November 8. The Biden administration is expected to try to repair America's traditional cooperative partnership with NATO and also strengthen alliances with South Korea and Japan. Given that he has declared rejoining the Paris Climate Accord a priority, President-elect Biden will likely seek to restore America's international

standing as a responsible nation. Though it might be difficult to reverse all the effects of the Trump administration's isolationist policies and weakening of alliances in a short period of time, robust promotion of internationalism by the Biden administration will nonetheless have a broad impact on the international order and the global security environment.

Prospects for US-South Korea Relations

Uncertainty regarding US-South Korea relations and issues on the Korean Peninsula will be substantially reduced as a result of President-elect Biden's victory. The importance of the US-South Korea alliance will be reaffirmed, and issues such as the cost of hosting US troops in Korea, possible reduction of troops stationed on the Korean Peninsula, and the possibility of withdrawal of American troops will be resolved.

Both President Trump and President-elect Biden called for a tougher stance against China, and the American people are also generally wary of China. While President Trump espoused a hardline stance against China, he neglected to strengthen cooperation with US allies. The Pivot to Asia strategy intended to keep China in check adopted by the Obama administration has transformed into the Indo-Pacific Strategy under the Trump administration which has increased the importance of alliances. The Biden administration is expected to implement a strategy of containing China through international cooperation and will consequently emphasize the importance of the US-South Korea alliance.

United States Forces Korea (USFK) not only counters North Korea but also functions as a regional force to preserve stability in East Asia. Therefore, the US is unlikely to substantially reduce or withdraw the USFK given the importance of the Korean Peninsula. But considering the fact that the US has sought to enhance the strategic flexibility of US forces deployed abroad since the Obama administration, USFK may undergo partial restructuring depending on circumstances.

The costs of hosting USFK is unlikely to be a significant problem. The Biden camp believes that South Korea already shares enough of the burden and that it is

substantially contributing to America's security. In contrast to European NATO countries, South Korea has consistently spent about 2.5% of its GDP on defense and unlike Japan, has also maintained sufficient military manpower through conscription. The political establishment in Washington also widely views President Trump's demand for South Korea to pay more of the costs as excessive.

The election of Biden administration that seeks to promote America's political and security interests through international cooperation and stronger alliances is not only an opportunity for South Korea but can also be a risk factor. If the Biden administration begins to attempt containment of China through international partnerships, institutions, and organizations like the WTO, it might demand South Korea's participation in these efforts. In addition, South Korea's dilemma will worsen if President-elect Biden, unlike President Trump who overlooked security issues, pursues a security cooperation coalition to curb China. The US has already made its intentions clear regarding the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a security group against China comprised of the US, Japan, Australia, and India, as well as the expanded Quad-Plus to which South Korea is a potential participant. The inauguration of the Biden administration may become a testing-ground for South Korea's diplomacy.

Prospects for Negotiations between the US and North Korea on Denuclearization

President Trump's summit diplomacy with North Korea created somewhat of an illusion. The President held summit meetings with North Korea for the first time in history in June 2018, and crossed the military demarcation line in the demilitarized zone (DMZ) in June 2019. President Trump has met Kim Jong-Un on three different occasions, and the two leaders have exchanged dozens of personal letters. However, bilateral negotiations between the US and North Korea on denuclearization have failed to achieve any tangible successes, and negotiations between the two sides have stalled since the Hanoi summit broke down in February 2019.

The reality of the North Korean nuclear problem that the Biden administration faces is structurally different from the past. North Korea has already reached a phase

where it is no longer developing nuclear weapons but is rather in the process of becoming a nuclear-capable country. Because of this, the Biden administration will be unable to resort to either the conciliatory North Korea policies adopted by the Clinton administration or revert to the strategic patience strategy of the Obama administration. Regarding this issue, Brian P. McKeon, a longtime aide to President-elect Biden and former principal adviser to Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense on national security, mentioned in an interview with Yonhap News in October that though the Biden administration's policies will be different from that of President Trump, "Joe Biden is not President Obama" and that "we know we can't go back to January 2017." The North Korean nuclear problem will likely be a high priority on the Biden administration's foreign policy agenda.

The Biden administration's principles on North Korean denuclearization can be summarized as "complete denuclearization eventually achieved through a series of small deals that are bargained through negotiations prepared from the bottom up." President-elect Biden has already stated that he would not pursue summit talks with North Korea as President Trump has. During the second Presidential debate held on October 22, President-elect Biden stated that he would only meet Kim Jong-Un "on the condition that he would agree that he would be drawing down his nuclear capacity" and claimed that "the Korean Peninsula should be a nuclear free zone." A nuclear free Korean Peninsula indicates complete denuclearization, and 'drawing down' nuclear capacity suggests the possibility of small deals with North Korea. This may be a realistic alternative considering the complexities of the North Korean nuclear problem, and it worth noting that President-elect Biden was a member of the Obama administration that managed to conclude the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear program.

Despite the inclination of President-elect Biden to emphasize international cooperation, it is unlikely that the US will rely on multilateral negotiations such as four-party or six-party talks on North Korea. Negotiations regarding the denuclearization of North Korea has now transitioned into a bilateral matter between the US and North Korea, and multilateral negotiations will likely only play a supplementary role. The effectiveness of multilateral talks, where China tends to

have considerable influence, will be limited considering how strategic competition between the US and China will continue to intensify during the Biden administration.

The inauguration of the Biden administration will be a test for North Korea, too. Although North Korea adopted a new path dependent on self-reliance after the Hanoi summit, it has failed to achieve significant accomplishments due to international sanctions, COVID-19, and floods. The 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea scheduled for January 2021 will be an opportunity to assess North Korea's new strategy and its policy towards US-North Korea negotiations on denuclearization. North Korea's policy options for negotiations with the Biden administration can be categorized as either attempting a 'frontal breakthrough through self-reliance,' reaching an agreement on denuclearization through partial compromises, or trying to prompt negotiations through provocations.

For North Korea, preparing for a prolonged negotiation process with the US by attempting a 'frontal breakthrough through self-reliance' may be difficult due to the sanctions regime as well as their increasing dependence on China. For a substantive agreement to emerge from bilateral negotiations between the US and North Korea, there needs to be 'Hanoi plus-alpha,' which necessitates additional concessions from North Korea. After the Hanoi summit meeting, North Korea has maintained its stance that it would make no more concessions. If the resumption of negotiations with the Biden administration is delayed, there is the possibility that North Korea will conduct high-level military provocations like test-launching their ICBMs or SLBMs. But conducting provocations will not be an easy decision given the fact that the North Korean economy is in crisis and due to how it could utterly derail the negotiation process. Regardless, there is a need to be cautious about resuming joint military exercises between the US and South Korea after the inauguration of the Biden administration because it might send North Korea wrong signals and be used to justify military provocations.

ROK Response

The response of the ROK should be the realization of the Korea Initiative to solve

the issues on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea has played an instrumental role in the summit diplomacy that has been active since 2018. South Korea opened the doors to the Korean Peninsula peace process by inviting North Korea to participate in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics, and facilitated the Singapore summit between the US and North Korea on June 12 by reaching an agreement on complete denuclearization at the Panmunjeom summit on April 27. The Pyongyang Declaration of September 19 discussed the issue of permanently dismantling the nuclear facilities in Yeongbyeon which became a core item on the agenda for the Hanoi summit meeting. The US-North Korea summit meeting at Panmunjeom on June 30, 2019, was also made possible because President Trump had been invited to Seoul.

South Korea needs to actively engage in diplomacy directed at the President-elect. President Trump, who has refused to concede the election, is unlikely to express much interest in the North Korea issue during the remainder of his term, while President-elect Biden will be inaugurated on January 20, next year. Considering the aftermath of the President's rejection of the election results and the schedule of hearings for the confirmation of Presidential appointees, it will take some time for the security and diplomacy-related posts in the Biden administration to be filled. It will also take time to form the US delegation to the US-North Korea negotiations on denuclearization and establish channels of communication with North Korea. Therefore, diplomatic efforts vis-a-vis the US during the transition period that reach out broadly to members of the Biden camp need to be increased so that the resumption of US-North Korea negotiations are expedited.

South Korea should also consider encouraging the negotiation process by using the end-of-war declaration as the motif. Kim Yo-Jong, the first Deputy Director of the United Front Department of the Workers' Party of Korea, mentioned both the withdrawal of US hostile policies towards North Korea and the resumption of negotiations on denuclearization in her statement addressing the US on June 10. An end-of-war declaration symbolizes the withdrawal of hostile policies towards North Korea. Given how there is the fear among some in the US that view an end-of-war declaration as a peace treaty from the perspective of international law, there is a need to expand conversations with the Biden camp to alleviate such

concerns. An end-of-war declaration indicates that its political declaration of war termination is separated from the notion of a peace treaty, and it functions as the entry point to US-North Korea negotiations on denuclearization and the Korean Peninsula peace process. A peace treaty that has the effect of international law needs to be concluded even after an end-of-war declaration is announced. Given its political nature, an end-of-war declaration will not impact the status of USFK or the UN Command in Korea. South Korea and China as well as the US and China, all participants in the Korean War, have normalized their diplomatic relations, while South and North Korea have agreed to a de facto end-of-war. South and North Korea will need to conclude a more comprehensive inter-Korean basic agreement after an end-of-war declaration is announced. Therefore, what is most important in this current moment is an end-of-war declaration between the US and North Korea.

Agreements on practical methods of denuclearization also need to be explored. Currently, the Biden camp has decided on preventing both the proliferation of North Korea's nuclear weapons and advancements to their nuclear technology as the incoming administration's primary objectives. This implies the freezing of North Korea's nuclear program. The reason why the US has unilaterally strengthened its sanctions on North Korea and North Korea has enhanced its nuclear capability is because there lacks an agreement on the notion of freezing North Korea's nuclear program. A consensus on what it means to freeze the nuclear program is imperative for both these issues. In addition, there is a need to begin dismantling the nuclear facilities in Yeongbyeon as has already been discussed, and further persuade North Korea to dismantle its highly enriched uranium (HEU) facilities in other regions of the country. This will substantially reduce North Korea's nuclear capability, which aligns with the views of the Biden camp.

South Korea must also actively pursue feasible methods of improving inter-Korean relations as greater trust between the two Koreas will not only revive US-North Korea negotiations on denuclearization but also help the promotion of the Korean Peninsula peace process. To establish a new system of peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, an inclusive inter-Korean life community must be formed that incorporates the three pillars of an economic community, socio-economic

community, and life community. In this present moment, a new community of common lifestyles on the Korean Peninsula, the importance of which has been highlighted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, needs to be materialized. Health and medical support for North Korea should be actualized, and a permanent humanitarian assistance system needs to be established for items such as food. The ‘Northeast Asia Cooperation Initiative for Infectious Disease Control and Public Health’ that President Moon proposed at the UN in September needs to be formalized, and North Korea should be persuaded to participate in the Initiative. Efforts should also be made on inter-Korean family reunions given President-elect Biden’s mentioning of possibly pursuing visits by Korean Americans from North Korea to their homeland. Trust building between South and North Korea must also be attempted through the implementation of agreed-upon items, such as the joint planning and surveying of North Korea’s railways and roads that can feasibly be accomplished even in the current environment.

The South Korean government should strive to prevent a diplomatic vacuum from now until next January when the newly elected Biden administration is inaugurated, and seek to obtain momentum for the realization of the Korean Peninsula peace process. Cooperation with the Biden camp needs to be strengthened, and the possibility of either dispatching a special envoy on North Korea to the US or an inter-Korean summit meeting needs to be considered. It is time to actively pursue the realization of the Korea Initiative that will transform the election of the Biden administration into a window of opportunity for the Korean Peninsula peace process.

©KINU 2020

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).