



Online Series

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The North Korea Policy of the Biden Administration and the U.S.-North Korea Relations¹⁾

Chung, Sung-Yoon

(Research Fellow, Unification Policy Research Division)

The purpose of this report is to predict the newly elected Biden administration's North Korea policy and future the U.S.-North Korea relations. To achieve this goal, this online report highlights ① group-thinking among decision-makers, ② assessment of North Korea's nuclear capabilities and threats, ③ policy-review of the Trump administration's North Korea strategy, and ④ links between above-mentioned factors and the underlying objectives of the Biden administration's overall foreign policy as four main factors that will determine how the incoming administration will craft its North Korea policy. Based on an analysis of these factors, this report predicts that ① a primacy strategy based on the strict principle of reciprocity, ② a strategy of reducing the threat of North Korea's nuclear weapons, ③ strategic utilization of coercions against North Korea, and ④ strengthening multilateral international cooperation as the four main aspects of the Biden administration's North Korea policy. This report argues that the Biden administration will likely implement a considerably dynamic policy on North Korea based on these principles and strategies. However, the uncertainty surrounding North Korea's response makes it difficult to exclude the possibility that future U.S.-North Korea will develop in extreme ways. This report predicts that relations between the U.S. and North Korea will be determined by whether and how North Korea chooses to conduct a provocation during the first six months of 2021.

1) This is the second online report in a two-part series that follows-up "Future of North Korea-U.S. Relations and South Korea's Strategic Response (1): Strategic Evaluation of Determining Factors in DPRK-U.S. Relations and Their Implication" published in September 2020 by the same author. This online report predicts America's North Korea policy and future U.S.-North Korea relations based on the framework established in the first report.
<https://kinu.or.kr/www/jsp/prg/api/dlVE.jsp?menuIdx=645&category=72&thisPage=1&searchField=&searchText=&biblioid=1538394>

Introduction

The Democratic Party's candidate Joseph R. Biden has been elected as the 46th President of the United States. Throughout his campaign, President-elect Biden argued that the U.S. should return to its traditional foreign policy of abiding by the rules and values of the liberal international order. This signals the abandonment of the Trump administration's "America First" policy. At the same time, it implies that the new administration's underlying foreign policy objective will be to restore American leadership and influence as the 'benign hegemon.' The aims and principles of the Biden administration will change America's policies on North Korea, and will decisively impact the establishment of a new U.S.-North Korea relationship as well as the prospects for North Korean denuclearization. What will be the Biden administration's underlying objectives and strategy toward North Korea? What impact will the implementation of the administration's policies have on U.S.-North Korea relations, and what will North Korea's strategic assessments be? To address these questions, this online report will first analyze factors that influence how the Biden administration will craft its North Korea policy, and will predict America's policy principles and the strategic thinking of U.S. policymakers based on such assessments. This online report will conclude by anticipating the direction of U.S.-North Korea relations shaped by America's strategy and North Korea's response.

Factors that Determine How the Biden Administration will Craft its North Korea Policy

U.S.-North Korea relations are determined by the competitive interaction between the strategy of both countries. Major components of these strategies, in turn, are determined by each country's underlying objectives. In other words, the underlying objectives of a state's foreign policy reveal the direction and principles of strategies that it wishes to implement. Thus, in order to predict the future of U.S.-North Korea relations, it is necessary to first analyze which factors will determine the Biden administration's underlying objectives regarding North Korea and how it will likely be shaped.

Predicting the Biden administration's basic attitude towards North Korea first requires an overview of how U.S. policymakers currently assess and think about the North Korea issues. First, U.S. decision-makers view North Korea's nuclear arsenal as a direct threat to America's national security. Therefore, U.S. policy on North Korea is crafted in parallel with its strategic thinking on national security. It also involves the collective thinking of numerous decision-makers including the President as well as officials in the areas of diplomacy, security, the economy, and the military. Second, North Korea is both a crucial issue for the regional order in Asia as well as a matter of alliances. The North Korean nuclear issue is a dispute that pits the interests of regional great powers against each other while, at the same time, it is fundamentally related to the survival and future of its allies, South Korea and Japan. Therefore, America's North Korea policy cannot be detached from its broader grand strategy of maintaining regional and global influence through its

alliance relationships. Lastly, the North Korean nuclear issue is one of the most difficult problems that several different administrations and their various approaches have failed to resolve over the past 30 years. This has resulted in growing fatigue over the issue as well as greater skepticism that an effective new alternative is unlikely to emerge.

Given these aspects, there are four main factors that will influence the Biden administration's underlying objectives regarding North Korea. First, the perceptions and beliefs about North Korea held not only by the President-elect but also key policymakers and advisors in the administration will be important. Several officials that worked closely in the Obama administration will likely return to work in the new Biden administration. Group-thinking may become a key determinant as it might arise among policymakers that share commonly held beliefs and experiences that stem from their experience working together for an extended period of time.²⁾ Second, the incoming administration's risk assessment of North Korea's nuclear capabilities will strongly impact the formation of North Korea policy. The U.S. conducts new risk assessments across all aspects of national security when a change in government occurs, and these evaluations become an instrumental reference point for a government's mid- and long-term strategic planning, evidenced by the fact that it is included in the *National Security Strategy*.³⁾

2) The topic of groupthink originated in social psychology but has been established as a cognitive approach in the field of international relations since the late-1970s. It is studied as one of the main ways in which irrational foreign policy decision-making may occur.

3) Since the Reagan administration in 1986 to the Trump administration, the U.S. has published the National Security Strategy (NSS) 17 times. Mandated by Congress through the Goldwater-Nichols Act passed in 1986, the NSS defines America's core national security interests and the international environment, and outlines America's response. The 2017 NSS published by the Trump administration specifically identifies the threat posed by North Korea's

The third factor is policy reviews of U.S.-North Korea negotiations and North Korea policy in general that were conducted under the Trump administration. Whereas risk assessments of North Korea's nuclear capabilities fall under the purview of the Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the intelligence community, policy reviews are conducted primarily by the transition team, the Department of State, and the Department of the Treasury. First and foremost, there will be a comprehensive assessment of working-level negotiations on North Korean denuclearization in general. Accomplishments achieved through cooperation with relevant countries like South Korea and Japan as well as cost-benefit calculations regarding the strategic utilization of sanctions against North Korea will also likely be analyzed. The fourth determinant will be how North Korea policy is connected to America's grand strategy. The aspects of U.S. foreign policy that will be most relevant to North Korea include the Indo-Pacific strategy, policy towards China, alliance policy, and global nonproliferation policy. Furthermore, the U.S. will likely consider whether it can either induce or coerce China's cooperation on the North Korea nuclear issue, and what type of cooperative relationship it should establish with South Korea regarding the end-of-war declaration on the Korean Peninsula as well as sanctions.⁴⁾

nuclear capabilities and stated that the U.S. remained "ready to respond with overwhelming force to North Korean aggression and will improve options to compel denuclearization of the peninsula."

- 4) It will likely take a considerable amount of time to incorporate these factors into policies. Furthermore, it is also possible that the Biden administration will be unable to focus on the North Korea issue because it has other pressing domestic issues to address including the transition process, the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recovery, and the racial and partisan divide.

Anticipating the Direction of the Biden Administration's North Korea Policy

Within this framework, what will be the direction of the Biden administration's policy towards North Korea and its main aspects? Accounting for the four factors discussed above, the Biden administration's North Korea policy is expected to exhibit the following four characteristics.

First, the Biden administration will craft a strategy of primacy based on strict tit-for-tat interactions with North Korea. Put differently, the Biden administration will likely craft its North Korea policy as an extension of its traditional method of diplomacy.⁵⁾ President-elect Biden, as well as his key advisors and the Democratic Party, has consistently criticized the Trump administration for its unconventional approach to diplomacy by making inappropriate concessions to North Korea and achieving few accomplishments on the issue of denuclearization.⁶⁾ Groupthink among these officials has resulted in the consensus that the only way to confirm and verify North Korea's sincerity regarding denuclearization is through 'strategically significant' implementation measures by North Korea. Given this dynamic, the Biden administration will be flexible towards negotiations but cautious on agreements, and will maintain a position of strength in negotiations while carefully verifying and assessing whether North Korea is keeping its promises. In

5) Regarding America's tradition of pursuing strategy of primacy, see, Patrick Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy has not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (2018): 9-46.
https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/full/10.1162/isec_a_00311?mobileUi=0.

6) Specifically, their perceptions can be summarized as follows. First, the Trump administration recognized the North Korean regime by hastily agreeing to summit meetings. Second, the Trump administration inflated the value of North Korea by overestimating North Korea's measures and decisions. Third, it also neglected North Korea's advancement of its nuclear capabilities by fixating on futile negotiations.

other words, the Biden administration might consider adopting ‘reverse salami tactics of sorts’ regarding its negotiations with North Korea by offering rewards that match North Korea’s level of cooperation.

Second, the Biden administration is expected to consider adopting a strong and swift threat reduction strategy regarding North Korea’s nuclear capabilities. The Biden administration will take note of the fact that North Korea has continued to upgrade its ability to strike the mainland of the U.S. with nuclear weapons during its negotiations with the U.S., as was confirmed during North Korea’s recent military parade. As a result, advisors in the Biden administration will actively incorporate North Korea’s improved nuclear capabilities in its risk assessments. Given these considerations, the Biden administration will likely decide that the direction of the roadmap towards North Korean denuclearization to be the ‘quick reduction of the threat of North Korea’s nuclear weapons followed by the stable promotion of complete denuclearization.’ This formula requires the Biden administration to achieve visible accomplishments that actively persuade North Korea to change its behavior soon after its inauguration. The Biden administration will have two policy options to achieve this immediate goal; either focus on threat reduction by freezing North Korea’s nuclear program by offering rewards first,⁷⁾ or aggressively induce North Korea to return to the bargaining table by curbing their efforts to further improve their nuclear capabilities by unambiguously conveying its resolve to deter

7) Contrary to the concerns of some, it is highly unlikely that the Biden administration will attempt to reach an ‘agreement on controls for the use of nuclear weapons’ based on the belief that complete denuclearization of North Korea is unattainable. This is because it means de facto recognition of North Korea’s nuclear weapons and a change to the fundamental goal of complete denuclearization of North Korea, outcomes that harm America’s national interests by threatening the collapse of the nonproliferation regime.

North Korea through either denial or punishment.

Third, the Biden administration is likely to strategically operationalize sanctions against North Korea. The new administration will likely conclude that the Trump administration failed to strategically leverage sanctions against North Korea during its bilateral negotiations on denuclearization. Advisors in the Biden administration will also highlight how U.S.-North Korea relations have stalled because it maintained a hardline stance against North Korea despite North Korea issuing specific demands and South Korea attempting to mediate. Meanwhile, President-elect Biden and his aides have also consistently expressed their disapproval of how the Trump administration failed to appropriately respond to North Korea resuming its missile tests and threatening to abandon the negotiation process. Given this, the Biden administration, unlike the Trump administration, will attempt to induce either voluntary or involuntary cooperation from North Korea by flexibly leveraging sanctions against North Korea. For example, the Biden administration will set an overall timeline for denuclearization and specify dates for compliance by North Korea. In addition, the U.S. will not only offer incentives in the form of relaxing sanctions as a reward for North Korea's implementation of agreed items but also clearly suggest the prospect of stronger sanctions should it violate agreements. The Biden administration will particularly respond more firmly against military provocations by North Korea compared to the previous administration. There remains the possibility that the Biden administration will try to militarily coerce North Korea by contemplating possible military action against North Korea if it concludes that diplomatic measures have been exhausted and North Korea remains insincere about denuclearization.⁸⁾

Lastly, it can be expected that the Biden administration will increase the level of international cooperation to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. First, the Biden administration will try to enhance trilateral cooperation with South Korea and Japan, two relevant countries directly affected by North Korea's nuclear arsenal. President-elect Biden will disapprove of the issue causing the deterioration of alliance partnerships or efforts to address the issue through weakened alliances. In addition, the Biden administration will also strongly demand active cooperation from China to resolve the North Korea issue. As Vice-President, President-elect Biden criticized China for leveraging the North Korean nuclear issue to merely enhance China's diplomatic standing.⁹⁾ Although it may not be as roughly-worded as the Trump administration's approach, the Biden administration will nonetheless assign China specific responsibilities and roles in the process towards denuclearization of North Korea. This may suggest that the Biden administration will strongly consider the 'Iran nuclear deal model' that includes South Korea, Japan, and China as a solution to the North Korean issue.¹⁰⁾

The Future of U.S.-North Korea Relations under the Biden Administration

In which direction will U.S.-North Korea relations progress under the Biden

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- 8) President-elect Biden also strongly criticized the Trump administration for weakening the sanctions regime against North Korea during the campaign, and has indicated that he would take a tougher stance on North Korea as he referred to Kim Jong-Un as a 'thug.'
- 9) As demonstrated by the phrase, "let China own the problem," the Obama administration demanded that China play a more active role in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue.
- 10) In an op-ed published in *Foreign Affairs* earlier this year, President-elect Biden stated his intention to improve cooperation with all relevant countries including China to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue.

administration? Though it is difficult to accurately anticipate, bilateral relations will likely develop rather dynamically compared to the past and have significant implications. This is because the threat of North Korean nuclear strikes against the mainland of the U.S. will become realized further as North Korea will be on the verge of reaching peak advancement of its nuclear capabilities during the Biden administration.¹¹⁾ Consequently, both the U.S. and North Korea will face a situation where the expected losses for both sides will increase if they maintain their current goals and strategies. Both the U.S. and North Korea will thus reach a crossroad where they will be compelled to choose between either transitioning to a conciliatory strategy of compromises or trying to quickly achieve their goals through aggressive methods. The Maginot Line for a strategic compromise will be the reduction of the threat against the mainland of the U.S. and firm resistance against denuclearization by North Korea.¹²⁾ The strategic calculations regarding this scenario are different for either side. As a last resort, the U.S. will attempt to reduce the threat against the mainland by implementing aggressive military methods if necessary. On the other hand, North Korea will try to maintain its nuclear capabilities or make the reduction of its nuclear capabilities extremely costly by increasing its threat against the mainland of the U.S. as long as possible.

The direction of U.S.-North Korea relations will likely be determined in the

11) In this online report, the ability to strike the mainland of the U.S. with nuclear weapons refers to second strike capabilities. Given America's overwhelming nuclear arsenal and missile defense system, the North Korean leadership is unlikely to conclude that a preemptive nuclear strike alone will realistically ensure its survival. Therefore, it is probable that North Korea is pursuing an assured retaliation posture and is thus attempting to acquire secondary strike capabilities as soon as possible.

12) Here, the Maginot Line refers to policy objectives that a state needs to defend in the final stages of a negotiation during which the effect of an opponent's strategy is at its peak.

early stages of the Biden administration, regardless of how it unfolds. The experience of four government transitions in the U.S. during the 30-year history of the North Korea nuclear issue reveals that U.S.-North Korea relations have always been uncomfortable in the immediate period after the inauguration of the new administration. There were no honeymoon periods at least during this period. As the table below demonstrates, major episodes that ended up determining bilateral relations between the U.S. and North Korea for the four newly inaugurated administrations all occurred within the first six months. Three of these were provocations by North Korea, while the other was strong statements by the U.S. President. Based on this history, whether North Korea chooses to conduct a provocation will initially have a significant impact on U.S.-North Korea relations this time as well.

<Table 1> U.S.-North Korea Relations Following a Transition

Year	Incoming Administration	Major Event
1993	Clinton Administration (Democrat)	· North Korea's announcement of its withdrawal from the NPT (March, 1993)
2001	Bush Administration (Republican)	· President Bush's 'Axis of Evil' Statement (January, 2002)
2009	Obama Administration (Democrat)	· North Korea's testing of long-range missiles (April, 2004) · North Korea's second nuclear test (May, 2009)
2017	Trump Administration (Republican)	· North Korea's testing of Hwasong-14 type ICBM (July, 2017) · President Trump's threat of 'Fire and Fury' (August, 2017)

Data: Summarized by author

If North Korea, as it has done in the past, tries to draw the attention of the new Biden administration and increase its strategic value by demonstrating its nuclear capabilities, the ongoing impasse in U.S.-North Korea relations will not easily be resolved at least during the first few months of the new administration.¹³⁾ Likewise, bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea will likely be postponed for a considerable period of time if North Korea strictly maintains its current frame of ‘removing hostile policies against North Korea in exchange for the resumption of talks’ as mentioned by Kim Yo-Jong in her statement on July 10. The Biden administration and the Washington establishment will become more suspicious of North Korea’s intent if it conducts military provocations or places conditions on the resumption of talks, which will consequently cause the U.S. to immediately increase coercive pressure on North Korea. In this case, the U.S. will continue to exert much time and effort in verifying North Korea’s intentions and approach North Korea cautiously even after it shifts to a strategy of compromise. Moreover, the U.S. will only offer concessions that it deems appropriate under the strict principle of reciprocity which will foster North Korean mistrust. In other words, provocations by North Korea will not only fail to draw the attention of the new Biden administration and influence America’s decision-making in order to cultivate a more favorable environment, but will instead spark a vicious cycle that will increase its costs.

It is also possible to anticipate a scenario in which North Korea abstains

13) In strategy theory, impasse refers to “situations where neither side can unilaterally achieve its objectives in a short period of time.”

from provoking the U.S. to wait and see, or one in which it even boldly chooses a negotiation strategy. If North Korea adopts a cautious approach vis-à-vis the U.S., the U.S. will likely not rush to prioritize coercive measures against North Korea but will rather review a wide range of policy options on North Korea as it seeks to assess North Korea's reactions both directly and indirectly. This will create an environment in which both sides can thoroughly calculate the benefits of compromise. A negotiation strategy also means that North Korea will not heavily depend on a strategy of coercing the U.S. using its nuclear capabilities, which in turn implies a revision of its 'low benefit, high reward' tactic. Recent studies show that nuclear states have a remarkably low success rate when coercing others and that nuclear coercion is no more efficient than general coercion.¹⁴⁾ Additionally, North Korea's transition to a negotiation strategy will precipitate a revision of the international sanctions regime against North Korea that its previous strategy of coercion against the U.S. caused, which will consequently reduce the costs of North Korea for resisting sanctions while also increasing hopes of expected future benefits. In particular, North Korea can expect to increase its expected benefits while preventing significant damage to its bargaining leverage as each round of talks proceed if the Biden administration adopts a policy based on the principles of reciprocity and incrementalism while maintaining a strategic policy of coercion.

14) A recent study analyzing coercion successes and failures through case studies of international crises from 1945 to 2001, has shown that nuclear states succeeded in coercing their adversaries 10 times out of 49, while non-nuclear states succeeded 16 times out of 69. This demonstrates that not only does coercion have a relatively low success rate in general, but that nuclear coercion is no more efficient than general coercion. Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 118~119.

Conclusion

This online report has highlighted groupthink among policymakers, assessments of North Korea's nuclear capabilities and threats, reviews of the Trump administration's North Korea policy, and those factors' connections with America's overall foreign policy as the main factors that will determine how the new Biden administration will craft the direction and principles of its North Korea policy. This online report suggests that a strategy of primacy based on strict principles of reciprocity, a strategy of first reducing the threat of North Korea's nuclear capabilities, strategic use of sanctions against North Korea, and strengthening multilateral international cooperation will be central features of the incoming administration's policies. The North Korea policy of the Biden administration will progress rather dynamically if these measures are implemented and these underlying objectives adopted.

The Biden administration will likely consider every initiative that has been attempted to resolve the North Korea nuclear issue and will be eager to try various methods.¹⁵⁾ It is highly probable that the Biden administration will apply the following three considerations and principles when making decisions on North Korea,

15) During the 30 year history of the North Korean nuclear issue, numerous methods and approaches have been attempted both separately and collectively. This includes the format of negotiations ranging from multilateral, trilateral, and bilateral negotiations, the process of negotiations as either top-down or bottom-up, the pursuit of either incremental or comprehensive agreements, and various other strategies such as coercion and compromise, or neglect and intervention to alter the opponent's level of resolve and policies. Not only has there been no correct answer but there also has not been much to learn from mistakes either. Therefore, it is the belief of the author that a debate on which methods are likely to be most effective in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue is unnecessary or less important at this current moment.

regardless of the policies it implements. First, the U.S. will no longer tolerate North Korea's advancements to its nuclear capabilities. Second, North Korea's ability to resist sanctions will eventually be exhausted. Third, the U.S. will not reject North Korean attempts to resume negotiations. Given this analysis, this online report concludes that it might be in North Korea's best interests to actively seek a compromise with the Biden administration as soon as possible.

North Korea may have privately wanted the reelection of President Trump in the hopes that his relative lack of knowledge of international relations may result in certain rewards. Conversely, North Korea may be uneasy about President-elect Biden's knowledge and experience as a seasoned foreign policy expert. They are likely to be wary of the strict attitude and dispassionate perceptions of North Korea held by the Democratic Party and advisors in the Biden camp. However, there is also a window of opportunity for North Korea. Given that the prospect of provocations by North Korea will likely dictate U.S.-North Korea relations, it is North Korea and not the U.S. that has the initial say on what future relations will look like. North Korea should abandon any attempts to increase its strategic value and draw the attention of the U.S. through provocations.

Even if the Biden administration addresses North Korea by strictly adhering to the principle of reciprocity, the policies implemented by the administration will likely include 'measure to measure' exchanges, an approach that North Korea consistently demanded from the Trump administration. It is unclear whether it was intended, nor is it without the prospect of backfiring, but North Korea's enhanced ability to target the mainland of the U.S. with nuclear capabilities may eventually increase America's need to pursue a compromise. Without referring to ambitious

goals of peace and stability in Northeast Asia, it is apparent what policies North Korea should adopt to ensure its survival and pursue its national interests. North Korea should not ignore an important opportunity to determine their own fate.

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