



## Online Series

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# DPRK-U.S. Relations After Biden Administration Took Office: Prospects and Tasks

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Can DPRK-U.S. relations find a breakthrough for improvement in 2021? The first half of the year is likely to witness the continued stalemate but the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise in March could change the situation. In the second half of this year, either a resumption of negotiation or the worsening of relations is a more likely scenario. The primary task the ROK should address is to restore inter-Korean dialogue to improve North Korea-U.S. relations and resume nuclear negotiations. South Korea is quite limited in serving a role as a mediator if not accompanied by the improvement of inter-Korean relations. A delay or cancellation of the ROK-U.S. military exercise scheduled for March is necessary, which could improve the conditions for resuming DPRK-U.S. relations and provide a chance to restore inter-Korean relations. In a consultation with the U.S., the ROK needs to point out the need for the U.S. to express the acknowledgement of the Joint Statement of the Singapore Summit and establish and implement a forward-looking North Korean policy. The ROK should also persuade the U.S. that North Korea's human rights issues should not have to be obstacles to nuclear negotiations. Ratification of the Panmunjeom Declaration at the National Assembly is an important and pressing task. It could become a crucial action for the ROK to actively develop inter-Korean relations and settle peace on the Korean Peninsula.

DRPK-U.S. relations have continued the stalemate until recently, ever since the breakdown of the North Korea-U.S. summit of Hanoi in February 2019. North Korea maintains that the future of North Korea-U.S. relations depends on a change of attitudes of the U.S., whose policy on North Korea is still uncertain after President Biden took office on January 20, 2021. In his address on overall foreign policy at the State Department on February 4, President Biden did not mention North Korea. It indicates that the U.S.'s official position on North Korean policy is in the process of review. How will the North Korean policy of the Biden administration turn out in 2021? Will North Korea-U.S. relations be able to find a breakthrough for the better? This paper reviews North Korea's current policy on the U.S., projects Biden administration's North Korean policy and North Korea-U.S. relations, and present South Korea's tasks ahead.

### **North Korea's Policy on the U.S.: Demands for Withdrawal of Hostile Policy toward North Korea and an Eye for an Eye and a Tooth for a Tooth**

Last January, North Korea announced at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress that "A key to establishing new DPRK-U.S. relations lies at the U.S. withdrawing hostile policy toward North Korea." Such a remark indicates that the future of DRPK-U.S. relations hinges on what action the U.S. would take. Such a position consistently remains since the breakdown of the North Korea-U.S. negotiations of Stockholm in October 2019. Kim Yo-jong said in her discourse aimed at the U.S. on July 10, 2020, that the basic theme of the DPRK-U.S. negotiation is not a 'lifting of sanctions in exchange for denuclearization' but a 'resumption of the DRPK-U.S. negotiation in return for the withdrawal of the hostile policy.' In other words, North Korea's stance is that the resumption of denuclearization negotiations will be determined by whether the U.S. would take action considered to be a withdrawal of hostile policy toward North Korea. Although the North did not reveal the extent to which the hostile policy is repealed in great detail, it is assumed to include trust-building measures that reflect the will for improving relations. The prime example can be a halt in the ROK-U.S. joint

military exercise as continuously claimed by North Korea.

North Korea's position also leads to its principle of policy toward the U.S. called "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." It means that if the U.S. would take up a radical measure focused on sanctions and pressure, North Korea, too, would intransigently take the same radical action and go even further to escalate tensions and worsen the situation depend on the level of the U.S. pressure and threat. In the same token, it also means that if the U.S. would take a forward-looking approach with a will for improving relations and engage in dialogue and negotiations, North Korea, too, would actively accommodate that.

As such, North Korea's position and principle on its policy toward the U.S. is clear. North Korea makes it known that it does not intend to have a flexible approach toward the U.S. first or pose a threat first but will actively respond to whichever direction the U.S. would take on its policy toward the North. Such a position brings out the prospects that North Korea will attempt to maintain the current DPRK-U.S. relations around the initial period of the Biden administration's term, and then would wait and see if there are any changes in the U.S. policy on the North. In fact, last year, North Korea has refrained from provoking the U.S. either verbally or through its action ever since last year's U.S. election period up until now. At least for now, North Korea has shown distinctively different patterns from the past where it provoked the U.S. and put it to the test with the testing of strategic weapons before and after the initial period of the new administration taking office. North Korea may judge that they cannot afford to take a risk associated with the escalation of tensions caused by the testing of strategic weapons aimed at provoking the U.S. when there is a mounting and pressing domestic need for addressing economic issues and overcoming the COVID-19 crisis. The North may conclude that there is no need to reduce the likelihood of the DPRK-U.S. negotiation opportunity even before figuring out whether the new U.S. administration would change its attitude.

However, North Korea's motive of strengthening its deterrence capability toward the U.S. necessitates the need for testing strategic weapons. The chance of North Korea testing strategic weapons is expected to increase as sanctions continue

without the U.S.'s forward-looking approach on North Korea, and more time would pass by with a lack of dialogue. In particular, the likelihood of North Korea criticizing the U.S. or of testing strategic weapons is expected to increase once the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise begins, or high-ranking officials of the U.S. administration express a hostile perception toward the DPRK, such as denial of the North Korean regime. Whether the ROK-U.S. joint military drill will be executed in the upcoming March could be a variable to North Korea's actions.

### **U.S.'s Policy on North Korea: Expansion of Agenda, Phased Approach vs. Deterrence**

U.S.'s North Korean policy is still uncertain, and it is hard to make an accurate prediction. However, a certain level of assumption about which direction North Korean policy would take is possible considering U.S.'s current domestic situation, prominent foreign affairs officials' remarks, and the U.S.'s external strategy focused on restoring the hegemony with democratic value at its core. First, the full-phased implementation of the U.S.'s North Korean policy is likely to be delayed primarily due to the seriousness of the domestic issues in the U.S. Currently, tackling the COVID-19 is a core task to handle along with other grave issues, including racial conflicts, economic recessions, a crisis in democracy exemplified by a rally on January 6 in Washington, and political polarization. On January 29, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated that the primary task of the Biden administration is to resolve domestic issues. As such, not much room is left for securing a domestic momentum for restoring hegemony, and early enforcement of North Korean policy, which is considered to be a 'thorny issue,' will not be easy as well. While the actual implementation of the external policy is expected to be delayed overall, President Biden announced a plan to hold a climate conference on the upcoming Early Day in April.

Re-reviewing and establishing North Korean policy will take a considerable amount of time. Contrary to the Trump administration, the Biden administration will probably

attempt to craft North Korean policy considering the consistency with other external policies and in connection with other issues. Internal discussions are also required to evaluate the previous North Korean policy, make a diagnosis on current North Korea's nuclear issues, and come up with a resolution. At the Senate Congressional Hearing on January 19, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken announced an intent to review the overall aspects of North Korean policy involving not only security issues but also humanitarian issues. Moreover, ROK President Moon Jae-in and U.S. President Biden made a consensus on the need for establishing a 'comprehensive strategy on North Korea' in their first official phone-call on February 4.

#### **Expansion of Agenda: Nuclear Issues and Humanitarianism or Human Rights**

The U.S. North Korean policy, which will become visible after re-review, is highly likely to have an expanded agenda compared to the past. As Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken indicated, North Korean policy appears to include not only nuclear issues but also humanitarian issues that reflect value-oriented diplomacy promoted by the Biden administration. What a review on the humanitarian aspect entails is not clear. If it means an active consideration of humanitarian assistance and cooperation toward North Korea, which nevertheless is not a point of interest for North Korea, it will contribute to trust-building between North Korea and the U.S. and will serve positively for resuming nuclear negotiations. Vice President Kamala D. Harris mentioned in her interview with Council on Foreign Relations in August 2019 that if North Korea takes a phased, verifiable action for dismantling its nuclear program, selective easing of sanctions under the condition of snapback is possible to improve the lives of North Korean people.

However, if a review on the humanitarian aspect culminates in the direction that weighs heavily toward taking an issue of North Korean people's civil rights, North Korea will fiercely resist such an attempt viewing it as an intervention in domestic affairs and a denial of the regime. It will not only cloud the prospects of nuclear negotiations but also aggravate the DRPK-U.S. relations. In the latest TV-aired presidential election debate, President Biden once criticized then-President Trump

for giving the North Korean regime legitimacy and went on to call Chairman Kim Jong-un a thug. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs at the Department of State, Jung Park, criticized the ROK government, who focused on reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea, based on inaccurate and fairly substance-lacking materials and pointed out the need for raising North Korea's human rights issues at a report released right before joining the State Department (January 22). It is possible that the U.S. would simultaneously pursue the pressure on North Korea for its people's civil rights and humanitarian assistance, which would naturally bring out North Korea's resistance.

#### **Possibility of Phased-Synchronous Approach**

The Biden administration is likely to take a phased and synchronous approach to resolve North Korea's nuclear issues. Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, in his op-ed of the New York Times in June 2018, laid out Iran's nuclear agreement as a model for addressing North Korea's nuclear issues and emphasized the need for intermediate agreements that trade the revealing of the nuclear program and nuclear freeze for a limited easing of sanctions. Also, he said in his interview with CBS last September that "North Korea will not immediately give up its nuclear weapons in full-scale, so dealing with this issue should take an incremental and phases step." A phased approach is in line with an election pledge of arms control for the new area aimed at nuclear nonproliferation suggested by President Biden during the election campaign. Although a phased-synchronous approach is neither officialized nor certain in the contents, the Biden administration nevertheless appears to review a relatively realistic solution as one option compared to the Trump administration's claim for de-facto denuclearization up-front or a big deal.

#### **Possibility of Deterrence and Management**

Meanwhile, it is also possible for the U.S. to focus on deterrence and management instead of devising and implementing a phased and synchronous approach while

considering North Korea's position. North Korea's nuclear and missile advancement has increased the U.S.'s threat perception toward North Korea's nuclear arsenal compared to the past. However, as the claim of "no-deal if not big-deal" that prevailed in Washington at the time of the Hanoi summit hinted, the level of perception on the urgency of North Korea's nuclear issues still does not seem that high in the U.S. Skeptical perception for the feasibility of denuclearization has also risen. A low level of perception on the urgency of 'resolution' in addition to a perception that North Korea's nuclear issue is a 'thorny issue' may result in the judgment that it is more effective for the U.S. to militarily deter North Korea's nuclear threats, maintain economic sanctions and pressure as opposed to investing a considerable amount of time and resources in reaching an agreement with North Korea. This scenario will lead to the second phase of strategic patience.

The possibility of this judgment will be amplified when nuclear issues are combined with a check on China, which is the U.S.'s central task. North Korea's nuclear threats can be utilized as an important rationale for the U.S. to gather the force of its allies for solidarity and strengthen military deterrence posture to put a check on China. It means that deterrence on North Korea's nuclear threat and a check and deterrence on China could not be distinct. The Obama administration strengthened trilateral security cooperation of the ROK, the U.S., and Japan to put a check on China while citing North Korea's nuclear threats as a rationale behind its actions. ROK-Japan agreement on wartime sex slavery and General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) were a by-product of the re-balancing strategy of the Obama administration. If the Biden administration puts North Korea's nuclear issues within the framework of the U.S.-China strategic competition, it is highly likely to focus on deterrence and management instead of resolution. In such a case, China's cooperation cannot be earned, and the DRPK-China cooperation will be strengthened further.



## Prospects for the DPRK-U.S. Relations in 2021

### First Half of the Year: The Continued Stalemate is Likely, but the ROK-U.S. Joint Military Exercise Will be a Factor

For a few months or the first half of this year, the DRPK-U.S. relations are highly likely to witness the management of the situation amidst the impasse with a lack of dialogue. North Korea will primarily focus on overcoming domestic issues and will respond depending on changes in the U.S.' North Korea policy. The U.S. likewise faces a pressing domestic issue and thus finds it hard to enforce the new North Korean policy in earnest during the first half of this year. Therefore, the DRPK-U.S. relations are highly likely to maintain the status quo amidst the stalemate during the first half of this year.

However, the upcoming ROK-U.S. joint military drill in March could become a variable. If the joint military exercise is carried out, North Korea could backfire in one way or the other. A possibility cannot be ruled out that the North could test-launch satellite, SLBM, or intermediate-range ballistic missile, if not ICBM. The Biden administration, unlike the Trump administration, may criticize North Korea for a violation of the resolution of the UN Security Council and enforce additional sanctions on North Korea's provocation even if that does not include the ICBM. That will intensify the DRPK-U.S. conflicts, and the resumption of dialogue and negotiations will be further delayed or put on the back-burner. Even if North Korea would not come up with testing strategic weapons, the execution of the ROK-U.S. joint military drill will be perceived as one of the U.S.'s hostile policies on the North, thereby negatively impacting the resumption of nuclear negotiations.

### Second Half of the Year: Expansion both for Resuming Dialogue and Negotiation and Worsening Relations Compared to the First Half of the Year

Although bilateral relations in the second half of this year may continue to remain amidst the impasse, either a resumption of negotiation or the worsening of relations is a more likely scenario. If the U.S. would take a trust-building measure deemed



to be a withdrawal of hostile policy after a re-review of the overall North Korean policy and adopt a phased-synchronous approach, North Korea is expected to actively engage in dialogue-negotiations. Such a process will be much better facilitated via South Korea's mediation once the inter-Korean dialogue is restored and the relations are improved. Such a case, however, could still be hindered by human rights issues. If the U.S. actively takes issues at North Korean people's civil rights and seeks to put it into items of the agenda, North Korea will backfire, which will lessen the chances of resuming dialogue and negotiations.

On the other hand, if the U.S. focuses on deterrence and management of North Korea, continues sanctions and pressure as the period without a dialogue prolongs, North Korea will judge that the U.S. does not intend to withdraw its hostile policy on the North. North Korea hence is highly likely to test strategic weapons without hesitation to reinforce its deterrence capability toward the U.S. and accelerate its nuclear and missile capability. The execution of the ROK-U.S. joint military drill in August could trigger the North to test strategic weapons. When this scenario becomes realized, the U.S. will more actively enforce additional sanctions on North Korea discarding the expectations for negotiations with North Korea, in which bilateral relations are highly likely to enter a long-term impasse after having gone through a period of aggravating conflicts and intensifying tensions.

### Tasks for the ROK

The role of the ROK is extremely crucial amidst a mounting uncertainty surrounding the prospects of DPRK-U.S. relations. The primary task the ROK should address is to restore inter-Korean dialogue and resume exchange to improve North Korea-U.S. relations and resume-facilitate nuclear negotiations. Current inter-Korean relations are completely shut down. With a lack of dialogue with North Korea, it will not be easy for the ROK to secure the base information that can be utilized to persuade the U.S. to craft a forward-looking North Korean policy. It is equally difficult to dissuade North Korea from test-launching strategic weapons.

Besides, South Korea is quite limited in serving a role as a mediator and facilitator. South Korea's mediating role is all the more important due to a lack of mutual understanding between the leadership and working-level officials of North Korea and the U.S. after the new U.S. administration came into office. However, that role can only be effective when accompanied with a restoration of inter-Korean dialogue. Improvement of inter-Korean relations is also essential for South and North Korea to proactively and stably manage the situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula if the Biden administration begins to adopt deterrence and management-oriented North Korean policy, taking on a path of the second phase of strategic patience and making it hard to resolve North Korea's nuclear issues.

Delaying or canceling the ROK-U.S. joint military drill is necessary to restore inter-Korean dialogue and mend relations. In the Party Congress last January, North Korea sent a message toward South Korea, effectively laying out a halt of the joint military exercise as a prerequisite for improving inter-Korean relations. Realistically-speaking, restoring inter-Korean dialogue appears to be a low possibility, at least for the time being, without a delay or cancellation of the March ROK-U.S. military exercise. A delay/cancellation of the ROK-U.S. military exercise is in line with a withdrawal of the U.S.' hostile policy toward North Korea, which will improve the conditions for resuming DRPK-U.S. relations. In other words, a delay/cancellation of the ROK-U.S. joint military drill could positively contribute both to resuming inter-Korean dialogue and North Korea-U.S. dialogue. One should remember that the peace process on the Korean Peninsula in 2018 started with President Moon expressing the intention for a delay of the ROK-U.S. joint military exercise on December 19, 2017. It is necessary to primarily delay the March drill, restore inter-Korean dialogue, and establish South-North Joint Military Commission to discuss military exercise and increase in arms buildup.

The conditions of DPRK-U.S. dialogue and negotiation can also be improved if the Biden administration expresses the intention to respect the Joint Statement of the Singapore Summit. The new U.S. administration's respect for the previous DRPK-U.S. agreement itself will lessen North Korea's mistrust toward the U.S. and

improve the motivation to resume the negotiations. The Joint Statement of the Singapore Summit could also make up the crucial foundation to fundamentally resolve issues of the Korean Peninsula as it reflects the spirit of the Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity, and Unification of the Korean Peninsula reached by leaders of the two Korea. In his op-ed of Foreign Affairs last year, President Biden said that the U.S. self-discarding an agreement made with other countries breaks the trust that the counterpart has for the U.S. The ROK needs to persuade the Biden administration to send a message that recognizes the validity of the Joint Statement of the Singapore Summit early on.

Furthermore, it is also necessary to make a phased·synchronous approach as the official North Korean strategy of the ROK and present a detailed negotiation proposal to the U.S., thereby mediating and persuading the U.S. to roll up the sleeves for nuclear resolution promptly and to resume negotiations. A phased and synchronous exchange is the virtually only solution to induce North Korea's positive response and reach an agreement. If the U.S. decides to focus on deterrence and management after reviewing the policy, nuclear negotiations will unlikely to be resumed. The ROK needs to emphasize in the consultation process with the U.S. that as a forward-looking approach on North Korea based on phased·synchronous exchange is delayed, North Korea's nuclear and missile capability will be strengthened and that a result can ensue that will contradict nonproliferation and arms control pledge of the Biden administration. In addition, it is also necessary to persuade the U.S. that North Korea's human rights issues should not have to be obstacles to nuclear negotiations and suggest that humanitarian assistance and cooperation, which will accompany flexibility of sanctions, can improve the quality of life and human rights for North Korean People.

Moreover, ratification of the Panmunjeom Declaration at the National Assembly is an important task. It carries a crucial meaning both internally and internationally in that it not only indicates an institutionalization of the inter-Korean agreement but also sends a message to North Korea and the U.S. that South Korea took the initiatives in weathering through challenges of the Korean Peninsula. In terms of

a message toward North Korea, it will declare South Korea's genuine will for observing and implementing the inter-Korean agreement, induce the restoration of inter-Korean dialogue and improvement of relations, and call for active cooperation to establish a denuclearization-peace regime. In terms of a message toward the U.S., it will produce the effect of having the U.S. perceive the Panmunjeom Declaration as a principle or a milestone when approaching the issues of the Korean Peninsula and devising and implementing policy. Ratification of the Panmunjeom Declaration at the National Assembly could become a crucial action for the ROK to develop inter-Korean relations actively and settle peace on the Korean Peninsula. ©KINU 2021

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