

# Evaluation of Biden Administration's North Korean Policy after a Review and the ROK's Response

## Online Series

2021. 05. 11. | CO 21-14

**Cho, Han-Bum**

(Senior Research Fellow, Unification Policy Research Division)

The Biden administration completed a review of its North Korean policy. The highest-ranking diplomatic and security line of the Biden administration announced after a review that the new North Korean policy adopts a 'calibrated practical approach' at its core. At the first congressional address on April 28, President Biden declared that the core elements of new North Korean policy in the Biden administration are 'alliance,' 'diplomacy,' and 'stern deterrence.' Given that the details of the North Korean policy of the Biden administration are yet to be revealed, time is still early to make a categorical evaluation. However, the confrontational phase continued between North Korea and the U.S. necessitates the ROK to play an important role. The current tasks are to make a comprehensive agreement, implement it in phases, draw a roadmap of action-for-action, and create an irreversible entry into denuclearization through a feasible initial agreement, including the 'from-Yongbyon type' agreement. The ROK-U.S. summit slated for May 21 is an important opportunity to kick-start the peace process on the Korean Peninsula.

### ‘Calibrated Practical Approach’

Within 100 days of the inauguration, the Biden administration completed a review of North Korean policy. On April 30, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki stated that a review of North Korean policy was completed and that the policy goal remains as a complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula articulating “Our policy is open to diplomacy with North Korea and aims for an ‘a calibrated practical approach’.” On May 2 and 3, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken used the same expression of ‘a calibrated practical approach,’ through which North Korean policy is open to diplomacy. Given that the details of the North Korean policy of the Biden administration are yet to be revealed, time is still early to make a categorical evaluation. However, considering the mentioning of the highest-ranking diplomatic and security line of the Biden administration, new North Korean policy after a review contains ‘calibrated practical approach’ that favors a diplomatic solution.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said “Our policy will not focus on a grand bargain and will not rely on strategic patience” articulating the difference between the Obama administration’s North Korean policy of strategic patience and that of the Trump administration of a big deal. This indicates that the Biden administration has ‘calibrated’ problems of North Korean policy of the Obama and Trump administrations through a review. Although the details of the practical approach are yet to be revealed, one can make an inference from President Biden’s remarks. Last October 22, President Biden said yes in a TV discussion to a question of whether he will meet Chairman Kim Jong Un saying “Under the condition that nuclear capability will be reduced to make the Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons.” This can be interpreted as that North Korea–U.S. summit is possible even at the level of reduction of nuclear capability if not a big deal. On May 2, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan mentioned that the new North Korean policy is not about ‘all for all, of nothing for nothing’ and that it aims for resolution, not hostility. It can mean that a small deal, or a deal at the appropriate level, if not a big deal, between North Korea and the U.S. is possible.

The Biden administration appears to seek a small deal that reduces nuclear capability in phases, not a big deal sought by the Trump administration. It could also be interpreted that the Biden administration tries to resolve issues of North Korea via the expansion of engagement, different from Obama's strategic patience.

### **'Alliance', 'Diplomacy', 'Stern Deterrence'**

The core elements of new North Korean policy in the Biden administration are 'alliance,' 'diplomacy,' and 'stern deterrence.' At the first congressional address on April 28, President Biden declared North Korea's nuclear issues to be a grave threat to the security of the U.S. and the world and that he will resolve it 'with our allies,' via 'diplomacy' and 'stern deterrence.'

The alliance is at the core of the Biden administration's 'value-based internationalism.' The Biden administration, away from the Trump administration's isolationism, seeks to respond to the authoritarian camp, such as China and Russia, in solidarity with the allies that share common values with the U.S., involving democracy, the market economy, and human rights. Since the inauguration, the Biden administration has consistently emphasized the trilateral cooperation of the ROK, U.S., and Japan regarding North Korea's issues. Last March, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan as their first visit overseas. In early April, the first multilateral meeting was held in Washington among security counterparts of the ROK, the U.S., and Japan. In early May, foreign ministers of the ROK, the U.S., and Japan also met in London.

Diplomacy has traditionally been at the core of the foreign policy of the U.S. democratic administration. While President Trump unilaterally pressured allies and competitors, the Biden administration seeks out a diplomatic solution. On May 3, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken mentioned "We have a very clear policy focused on diplomacy" stating that he would like North Korea to seize the diplomatic opportunity. The Biden administration also seeks out a diplomatic solution regarding

Iran's nuclear issue that restores the JCPOA, which was repealed by the Trump administration.

Stern deterrence can be viewed as a means to induce North Korea into the diplomatic table. The failure of the strategic patience of the Obama administration indicates that North Korea's nuclear issues got worsened by practically neglecting North Korea. A lack of strong deterrence can be viewed as a fundamental limitation of the strategic patience policy. Given the inclination of the Biden administration, a stern deterrence could include a restraint on North Korea's nuclear sophistication, and on its armed provocations, sanctions equivalent to the maximum pressure level, an aggressive move on North Korea vulnerabilities, such as human rights, and utilization of China's influence.

The Biden administration is expected to strengthen the alliance and solidarity to resolve North Korean issues, prioritize diplomatic solutions, and maximize the deterrence to put a check on North Korea's behaviors.

## Concerns for Strategic Patience Season 2

Given the prolonged nature and complexity of the resolution of North Korea's nuclear issues, it is positive that the Biden administration's North Korean policy focuses on practicality. Its North Korean policy could be viewed as a realistic alternative to prevent the worsening of North Korea's nuclear issues and reduce its nuclear capability in phases. Biden administration's emphasis on solidarity with the alliance is also positive toward the ROK-U.S. coordination. However, the Biden administration's North Korean policy seems to carry some limitations although the details are yet to be revealed.

The Biden administration has reviewed North Korean policy for as long as 100 days ever since the inauguration. Even before the inauguration, the Biden administration declared China to be the primary threat and competitor and has given more weight to a policy of putting a check on China upon taking office. The new U.S. administration also made clear the policy orientation toward Russia and Iran

from the early period. North Korea is the only policy area that the Biden administration underwent a review. On May 3, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said “We will see not only what North Korea will say in a few days and months, but also see what North Korea will do.” Immediacy regarding the recognition of North Korean issues was not found given his remarks hinting that the U.S. could wait a few more months even after 100 days of review of the North Korean policy. The seat of Special Representative for North Korea remains empty even after the Biden administration completed a review and there is no sign of appointing the position anytime soon.

It is also possible that the Biden administration’s North Korean policy could mark the beginning of season 2 of strategic patience. North Korea already adopted the doctrine of self-reliance (*Charkyok Kaengsaeng*) on the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) last January, which illustrates a long-term muddling-through strategy against sanctions imposed on North Korea. North Korea wants to secure enough rationale and tangible benefits so that they could come to the diplomatic table, which, however, is not presented by the North Korean policy of the Biden administration. The instances that North Korea’s Foreign Ministry released two critical statements toward the U.S. can be interpreted as the immediate backfire of North Korea toward the U.S. North Korean policy.

The means for imposing a stern deterrence are also limited. Sanctions on North Korea are already maintained at the maximum level and North Korea has increased its responsive capability to sanctions. It is hard to find any instances of dictatorships succumbed to sanctions. The Biden administration has intensified the pressure on North Korea’s human rights issues and appears to appoint a special envoy of North Korea’s human rights. However, resolving the human rights issues of dictatorship involves the mid-to-long-term perspective. Besides, given that North Korea strongly condemns the U.S. for raising human rights issues, the U.S. emphasis on North Korea’s human rights issues is not likely to have positive implications on North Korea-U.S. denuclearization negotiations in the short-term.

The U.S. wants a limited China’s influence on North Korea. On May 4, Antony

J. Blinken. Secretary of State said that there are a variety of areas such as climate change that overlap the interests with China and that “without a doubt, there will be a discussion on North Korea and its nuclear programs (with China) in the coming days.” However, whether China will accommodate the U.S.’s suggestion of cooperating sector-by-sector under the situation that the U.S. started to impose a full-blown check on China in almost all areas. It is not an easy choice when considering that North Korea-China relations could be fundamentally shaken if China directly pressures North Korea or if it halts or downsizes the assistance delivered to the North. North Korea has held a deep sense of betrayal due to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the ROK and China. North Korea also had no choice but to witness the flourishing relations between the ROK and China in the excruciatingly painful times of the Arduous March of the mid-1990s.

The problem, though, is a lack of alternative when a stern deterrence goes sour. The failure of strategic patience is attributed to a limitation of the tools that restrict North Korea’s behaviors during the period of patience. It remains to be seen whether a ‘calibrated practical approach’ that utilizes the alliance, solidarity and stern deterrence could overcome the limitations of strategic patience of the past.

### **Direction Going Forward**

Korea’s diplomatic space remains in place despite North Korea’s aggressive attitudes toward South Korea. South Korea’s role is ever more becoming important. North Korea’s difficulties have been aggravating due to sanctions and the prolonged COVID-19 situation. A strategy of self-reliance is a relic of the old era that proves to be a failure. Without a lift on sanctions imposed on North Korea, there is no guarantee not only on North Korea’s economy but also the future of the Kim Jong Un regime. Paradoxically, North Korea is the actor that wants the resumption of North Korea-U.S. negotiations the most. The U.S. is also confronted with the need to preclude the worsening of the situation given that North Korea’s nuclear issues had already surpassed the inflection point. The U.S. does not seem to be capable

of inducing North Korea. Since mid-February, the U.S. has attempted a contact with the North, which was met by no response from North Korea. North Korea still maintains its position of no-concession and the same goes true for the U.S. when it comes to issues of North Korea and Iran. The confrontational phase without a prior concession necessitates the role of the ROK.

It is time to design the Korea Initiative. It is imperative that efforts be placed to resolve the stalemate of North Korea-U.S. denuclearization, which could enter a prolonged phase at any time. Any possibility of North Korea launching nuclear testing and mid-to long-range ballistic missiles should be prevented. Alternatives should be designed with the reflection on lessons learned through 2018 and 2019 North Korea-U.S. denuclearization negotiations. The ROK government played an important role in North Korea-U.S. summits in Singapore and Hanoi and North Korea-U.S. summit meetings in Panmunjeom but failed to deliver tangible accomplishments.

The ROK should play an active role to help the two parties reach a practical agreement going beyond mediating for their meeting between North Korea and the U.S. and setting the negotiation agenda. What is positive is that a moratorium on North Korea's launch of nuclear testing and mid-and long-range ballistic missiles still is in place and that North Korea once revealed its intent to dismantle Yongbyon nuclear complex. On a discourse toward the U.S. of July 10, 2020, Kim Yo-jong the Deputy Director of the WPK called the Yongbyon nuclear facilities a "central nerve of our nuclear development." Dr. Siegfried S. Hecker, Senior Fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford, who is one of the most renowned experts in North Korea's nuclear issues and visited Yongbyon nuclear facilities in the past, said in an interview with the 38 North that Yongbyon nuclear facilities have newly hosted new reactors, uranium hexafluoride production facility needed for enrichment, fuel fabrication facility, and what appears to be a facility of separating tritium in addition to about 4,000 centrifuges. Tritium needed for manufacturing h-bomb can only be produced in Yongbyon nuclear facilities in North Korea. Dr. Siegfried S. Hecker spurn the claims of Yongbyon nuclear facilities being



obsolete saying “I can’t help but laugh whenever people say that Yongbyon is old.”

Yongbyon nuclear facilities are at the core of North Korea’s nuclear program, not a part of it. John Bolton, the former National Security Advisor at the White House took pride in that the U.S. refused North Korea’s suggestions to exchange the dismantlement of Yongbyon nuclear facilities with a partial lifting of sanctions at Hanoi but it was simply his own evaluation. In fact, according to Dr. Siegfried S. Hecker, the U.S. probably lost the opportunity to eliminate the core of North Korea’s nuclear programs. It is favorable to the U.S. given that a lifting of sanctions is always reversible while the dismantling of Yongbyon nuclear facilities is irreversible. Dismantling Yongbyon nuclear facilities necessitates the on-site investigation and verification, which will reveal the nuclear capability of North Korea to a significant degree.

The tasks we are facing are to make a comprehensive agreement, implement it in phases, draw a roadmap of action-for-action, and create an irreversible entry into denuclearization through a feasible initial agreement. Considering the complexity and longevity of North Korea’s nuclear issues, it is in a way inevitable to make a comprehensive agreement on complete denuclearization and to implement it in phases. Furthermore, it is necessary to accelerate the implementation of the roadmap by each side putting in action a phased denuclearization measure and corresponding measures. It is necessary to consider an agreement of ‘from-Yongbyon-type’ to create an irreversible entry into denuclearization. The ‘From-Yongbyon-type’ agreement is to add a freeze to the already suggested dismantlement of North Korea’s Yongbyon nuclear facilities and to have the U.S. and South Korea implement corresponding measures. Given that North Korea has consistently sophisticated its nuclear capabilities, such as the production of nuclear materials and ballistic missiles, the freeze is the most pressing task. It could be said that a reduction of nuclear capability is done to a significant degree if a freeze could prevent the worsening of the situation and if Yongbyon nuclear facilities, the core of North Korea’s nuclear program, could be dismantled. The ‘from Yongbyon-type’ agreement could become a realistic alternative considering that the agreement based on Yongbyon’s



dismantlement already suggested by North Korea could make a breakthrough in the current situation.

The U.S. corresponding measures could involve the end-of-the-war declaration, trust-building measures such as the establishment of North Korea-U.S. liaison office, and a partial lifting of sanctions. South Korea could take corresponding measures such as the implementation of inter-Korean agreements (linkage of railways and roads), the resumption of Gaesong Industrial Complex (GIC), and the tour to Mt. Geumgang, and the lifting of May 24 measures. In that way, the ROK could secure the drive for the development of inter-Korean relations while at the same time taking the burden off of the U.S. shoulder when it comes to corresponding measures. The 'from-Yongbyon-type' carries the characteristics of a plan A. A creative initial agreement should be drawn combining North Korea's denuclearization measures and the corresponding measures of the U.S. and Korea based on the Yongbyon dismantlement.

The ROK-U.S. summit slated for May 21 is an important opportunity to drive North Korea-U.S. denuclearization negotiations. In particular, it is necessary to affirm North Korea's intention before the ROK-U.S. summit. The ROK should operate official-unofficial channels and consider sending a high-level special envoy. Depending on the circumstances, a brief encounter between leaders of both Korea can be arranged at Panmunjeom. By utilizing the alliance-focused principle of the Biden administration, the ROK should employ a 'calibrated practical approach' in inducing North Korea into negotiating table in cooperation with the U.S., and build the consensus for drawing the initial denuclearization agreements. What matters is to reach and implement the practical denuclearization agreement via the ROK-U.S. summit. It is time to seize the crucial opportunity for kick-starting the peace process on the Korean Peninsula via the Korea Initiative. ©KINU 2021

※ 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).