

Evaluating the U.S.-South Korea Summit Meeting and Future Prospects: Remaining Challenges from the Summit

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Min, TaeEun

(Research Fellow, Peace Research Division)

On May 22 (KST), South Korean President Moon Jae-in became only the second foreign leader to hold a summit meeting at the White House with U.S. President Joe Biden. Expectations were high that the summit would be an opportunity to cultivate a wave of change for peace on the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, the meeting was considered an important occasion to confirm how closely aligned the South Korean government's views on U.S.-South Korean cooperation are with that of the newly inaugurated Biden administration that began its term in January and also coordinate views. The summit reaffirmed the strong alliance between the two countries and achieved the following: 1) verified South Korea's global status and role, 2) confirmed America's willingness to uphold the spirit of the Singapore joint statement and support inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation, and 3) bought time for South Korea to craft a strategy in response to the intensifying competition between the U.S. and China regarding regional security cooperation. On the other hand, the U.S.-South Korea summit was disappointing in a few aspects and left future challenges to be resolved. Above all, absent from the leaders' joint statement were any details about discussions or agreements on how to achieve denuclearization, issues that the South Korean government had hoped to include. Moreover, the matter of coordinating and linking humanitarian assistance with the improvement of human rights in North Korea was also missing from the proceedings, which indicates that the two allies will need to continue to work towards crafting a shared strategy on this issue. Lastly, it highlighted the need to swiftly but also carefully devise a prudent plan to improve relations between South Korea and Japan to facilitate U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral cooperation that the U.S. has continued to emphasize.

On May 22 (KST), South Korean President Moon Jae-in became only the second foreign leader to hold a summit meeting at the White House with U.S. President Joe Biden. This was the first meeting between the presidents of South Korea and the U.S. since the last bilateral summit meeting held in September 2019 during the United Nations General Assembly in New York. Since then, the world has experienced changes in almost every aspect of everyday life due to an unprecedented global pandemic. In contrast, however, relations between the U.S. and North Korea and between South and North Korea have been at a standstill during this period. Therefore, expectations were high that the U.S.–South Korea summit meeting could cultivate a wind of change for peace on the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, the meeting was an important occasion to confirm how closely aligned the South Korean government's views on U.S.–South Korean cooperation are with that of the newly inaugurated Biden administration that began its term in January and coordinate views.

Main Outcomes and Achievements of the U.S.–South Korea Summit

The main items on the agenda during this U.S.–South Korea summit meeting can be summarized as the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula through the resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem, cooperation on vaccine procurement and the economy with regards to the COVID-19 response, climate change, and other environmental issues. According to White House records of the first phone call between President Moon and President Biden in January, the call between Secretary of State Tony Blinken and the Director of National Security Suh Hoon in March, and the meeting in Washington between the heads of national security of the U.S., South Korea, and Japan in April, the U.S. has consistently raised these three issues as the most important ones that require cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea. This, in turn, suggests that they were likely to be discussed again during the summit meeting. Given that there was only a slim chance of items on the meeting agenda being deviated from our expectation, it is necessary to more strictly assess whether the South Korean government was able to achieve its goals through the

summit as initially set and planned.

Through this summit meeting, the two countries demonstrated the strength of the alliance by confirming their shared commitment towards the combined defense system of the U.S.–South Korea military alliance as well as their willingness to proceed with the transfer of operational control (OPCON). Moreover, the two countries reaffirmed mutual trust based on the U.S.–ROK alliance by agreeing to terminate the Revised Missile Guidelines. The specific achievements of this summit, which confirmed the strength of the alliance, can be summarized as follows; 1) verifying South Korea’s global status and role, 2) confirming America’s willingness to uphold the spirit of the Singapore joint statement and support inter–Korean dialogue and cooperation, and 3) buying time for South Korea to craft a strategy in response to the intensifying competition between the U.S. and China over regional security cooperation.

The first achievement is that South Korea was able to confirm its global status and role. In the leaders’ joint statement following the summit, the future of the U.S.–South Korea relationship was clearly depicted as a partnership, through which the two countries will respond to the changing global security environment together. Furthermore, it unequivocally revealed America’s hope that South Korea will actively participate in the collective response to global health and environmental issues that the U.S. is leading. First, the two allies agreed to increase mutual investment in, and conduct joint research and development on, areas such as semiconductors, clean batteries, hydrogen and clean energy, and strategic and critical materials in response to the changing global technology environment. In addition, the two countries also agreed to provide funds, human resources, and technology while also jointly establishing a cooperative network for the goals of global health, provision of vaccines, and the reduction of greenhouse gas with international organizations playing a main role, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), COVAX, and the Paris Agreement. These agreements signal that relations between the U.S. and South Korea will evolve beyond that of a traditional security alliance and major trading partner to a more comprehensive alliance that encompasses knowledge, technology,

health, and the environment. Moreover, it is worth noting how the U.S. requested assistance from South Korea in resolving the issues of immigration and poverty in three central American countries: Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. This is because the request reflects the Biden administration's expectations that South Korea may meaningfully contribute to the resolution of America's important issues. As such, the fact that the U.S. and South Korea agreed to collectively respond to various global problems based on a close partnership indicates how the summit meeting significantly contributed to the enhancement and solidification of South Korea's global status during a period of change.

The second achievement is the confirmation of America's support towards the pursuit of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula as well as inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation—two components vital to the peace process on the Korean Peninsula. Before President Moon boarded his plane to Washington, it was pointed out that the 'continuation of the Singapore joint statement' should be clearly specified in the U.S.–South Korea joint statement. This is because while the U.S. has continued to express its support for inter-Korean cooperation and humanitarian assistance to North Korea, necessary components for the establishment of peace on the Korean Peninsula, the U.S. has nonetheless given the impression that it prioritizes initial steps towards denuclearization taken first by North Korea. But the leaders' joint statement declared that the U.S. and South Korea "reaffirm our common belief that diplomacy and dialogue, based on previous inter-Korean and U.S.–DPRK commitments such as the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration and Singapore Joint Statement, are essential to achieve the complete denuclearization and establishment of permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula," thereby providing the South Korean government with substantive support for its future efforts in resuming dialogue with North Korea.¹⁾

The third achievement of this summit is that South Korea managed to buy time

1) The White House, "U.S.–ROK Leaders' Joint Statement," May 21, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/> (accessed May 27, 2021).

to craft a strategic response to the intensifying competition between the U.S. and China by avoiding direct discussions or mentions of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). There were prior concerns that the Biden administration, which has pressured China in almost every issue area much more aggressively than had been anticipated, might explicitly request South Korea's participation in its Indo-Pacific strategy centered around Quad, which is perceived as a coalition against China. But the summit ended with the two countries committing "to maintaining an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific" and pledging "to maintain peace and stability, lawful unimpeded commerce, and respect for international law, including freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea and beyond."²⁾ This is the result of America's understanding of South Korea's strategic position which, in turn, can be viewed as South Korea's preparation efforts coming to fruition.

Remaining Challenges

Even though it is generally considered a great success, there are still a few challenges that remain from this summit. Above all, absent from the leaders' joint statement were any details about discussions or agreements on how to achieve denuclearization, an aspect that the South Korean government had hoped for. In other words, there was no mention of specific discussions regarding issues such as the partial lifting of U.S. sanctions on North Korea, the reduction or cancellation of U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises, and the declaration of the end of the Korean War, all of which will inevitably be raised in the process of resolving the North Korean nuclear problem. Instead, the leaders' joint statement reaffirmed America's previous position that the North Korean problem should be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy while sanctions remain in place. Substantive details regarding the method of denuclearization may have been omitted from the joint

2) The White House, "U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement," May 21, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/> (accessed May 27, 2021).

statement because the Biden administration, which has approached the North Korean problem cautiously, has not yet established a specific strategy. But the fact that it was not mentioned in the joint statement could also be the result of a strategic decision by Seoul and Washington. If so, then the U.S. and South Korea must now devise measures that will persuade North Korea to respond positively to the denuclearization strategy that the two allies discussed. In other words, the U.S. and South Korea need to initiate a process that transforms the prepared denuclearization proposal into effective conducive measures that can bring North Korea to the negotiation table.

Second, it is unfortunate that there was no indication of how the two leaders would coordinate and link humanitarian assistance to North Korea with the improvement of human rights. This dynamic can be viewed both as two sides of the same coin as well as a double-edged sword. To date, South Korea has sincerely considered various ways of facilitating inter-Korean humanitarian cooperation on areas such as food, health, and medical equipment. In contrast, the Biden administration has focused more on human rights violations in North Korea. This ‘mismatch’ between the positions of the U.S. and South Korea was confirmed during Secretary of State Tony Blinken’s visit to South Korea earlier this year in March. During his press conference, Secretary Blinken described the North Korean regime as ‘repressive’ and pointed out widespread and systemic human rights violations in North Korea. The South Korean government refrained from issuing a visible public response. From South Korea’s perspective with its dual focus on persuading North Korea to return to the negotiation table and resuming inter-Korean dialogue, it is natural to have concerns that mentions of the human rights issue may provoke the North Korean regime. The U.S., despite being well aware of Seoul’s perspective, continues to raise the human rights issue because maintaining the rhetoric on human rights is an effective strategy to maintain sanctions and pressure North Korea. Furthermore, it is also an indication that the Biden administration will not make North Korea an exception when it comes to the core values of its foreign policy which include democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. Given this, the U.S. and South Korea

must coordinate policy to find effective ways of resolving the human rights issue in North Korea and providing humanitarian assistance simultaneously, a task that will not be easy for either side.

The last challenge remaining from the summit meeting is the improvement of relations between South Korea and Japan. Underlying the Biden administration's urging of better relations between South Korea and Japan is the determination that cooperation between these two countries is essential for the expansion of U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. also believes that stronger ties between Seoul and Tokyo can put further pressure on North Korea by involving China in issues of North Korea. But for South Korea, relations with Japan cannot solely be viewed through the strategic lens of North Korea. The South Korean government should earnestly begin gathering the wisdom needed to devise a prudent strategy for better relations with Japan, a request that was raised during this summit.

Policy Recommendations Regarding the Korean Peninsula Peace Process and Diplomacy towards Neighboring Countries

The achievements derived from this summit meeting can be summarized as the confirmation of South Korea's active and leading role in global issues and inter-Korean relations. But in order for these accomplishments to contribute to the successful pursuit of the Korean Peninsula peace process, there needs to be a truly "calibrated and practical approach." In particular, a justifiable and pragmatic strategy must be crafted to continue close collaboration with the Biden administration that will likely attempt to promote normative values such as democracy and human rights through extremely practical approach.

First, Seoul should use the sharing of the outcomes of the summit meeting with Pyongyang as an opportunity to resume inter-Korean dialogue. South Korea should emphasize America's resolve towards the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and focus on aspects of the summit meeting that can potentially persuade North Korea. For example, the leaders of the U.S. and South Korea agreed on the global

provision of vaccines and humanitarian assistance to North Korea. These items need to be vigorously proposed to North Korea and their reaction needs to be accommodated. Furthermore, the next reunion meeting of separated families of the two Koreas may actively be pursued with the goal of hosting the next round of reunions on either June 25 or August 15 since the U.S. and South Korea expressed willingness to facilitate it. South Korea may also try to reopen the Inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office through this initiative.

Second, discussions on peace on the Korean Peninsula, including South Korea's policies towards North Korea, need to move away from an exclusive focus on nuclear weapons and other security-related issues. Instead, South Korea needs to seek cooperation with the U.S. by revising its North Korea policy to include ways of contributing to democracy and the environment. For example, South Korea may propose a plan for trilateral cooperation among the U.S., South Korea, and North Korea based on a combination of the low carbon and eco-friendly policies of the U.S. and South Korea's 'Green New Deal' policy. Another strategy might be to first include plans for inter-Korean cooperation in South Korea's 'Green New Deal' policy.

Third, attention needs to be paid to avoid giving the impression that relations between South Korea and Japan and inter-Korean relations are mutually dependent. Specifically, there needs to be caution against discourse made 'by South Korea' emphasizing the need to improve bilateral relations with Japan to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem or enhance inter-Korean relations. In other words, signals that cooperation with Japan is necessary because efforts by the U.S., South Korea, and North Korea to resolve the impasse on the Korean Peninsula are limited must be prevented. This is because such signals may weaken South Korea's role and influence as the Korean Peninsula peace process is pursued in the long-run. Furthermore, this might also worsen relations between Japan and North Korea and make solutions more difficult to achieve. Also, Japan's role in inter-Korean relations is unlikely to receive support from the public without a sincere domestic debate and a consensus on what it would entail.

Lastly, South Korea needs to continue to update and revise its policy within the

context of the competition between the U.S. and China during the ‘time bought’ through this summit meeting. It must also not be forgotten that the U.S. raised the potential for conflict between the U.S. and China by including the issue of Taiwan in the summit joint statement. Regarding America’s efforts to expand its regional influence through the Quad, the dominant recommendation is that South Korea should cooperate with the U.S. on non-military issues such as the environment and cooperate with China on the economy. Of course, such the ‘maintenance of strategic ambiguity’ will be most ideal. But such an approach is likely to be viewed unfavorably by both Washington and Beijing should the U.S.-China competition intensify further. This suggests that various scenarios should be considered and assessed during the time bought through this summit. In addition, close communication with the U.S. needs to continue in order to ensure that the U.S. does not explicitly pressure South Korea regarding this issue. ©KINU 2021

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