



## [After Trump Series 2] Prospects for U.S.–South Korea Cooperation in an Era of U.S.–China Strategic Competition

### First Things First: U.S. Korea Policy in the Biden Administration

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Joe Biden’s election as America’s 46th President and the defeat of Donald Trump necessitate a careful appraisal of U.S. Korea policy, and of U.S. strategy and policy in Northeast Asia as a whole. These require an evaluation of the legacy of the Trump Administration; and consideration of three issues that will shape U.S. policy in the Biden Administration: (1) reaffirming and rebuilding America’s alliance relationships; (2) China’s political, economic, and strategic directions and how U.S. policy could influence Beijing’s policy choices; and (3) North Korea’s political, economic, and strategic orientation, and how the actions of the U.S. and other powers could influence the DPRK’s calculations and future behavior. None of these issues are for the United States alone to decide. At the same time, no incoming administration starts with a blank slate. A single short essay cannot address these issues in detail, but it can identify the issues that will most likely shape U.S. policy choices.

Joe Biden’s election occurred amidst the most disruptive and divisive period in U.S. domestic politics in many decades. The new administration must confront the worst public health crisis in the United States in a century. This has already involved the death of more than 250,000 Americans and the infection of many millions more, with the crisis hideously mismanaged by the outgoing administration; resultant levels of unemployment and business closures that will greatly impede America’s full economic recovery; and acute polarization (much of it over racial inequities and glaring economic inequality) that have undermined the country’s democratic norms.

Though the results of the election are beyond dispute, Donald Trump and his inner circle are attempting to reverse the electoral outcome and to disrupt the peaceful, orderly transfer of political power in the United States. Trump’s desperate attempt to impede the U.S. governmental process and

complicate President-elect Biden's efforts to renormalize American politics are disgraceful, and corrosive of long-held political norms. They must be condemned and opposed as illegitimate actions designed to subvert the democratic process.

Developments since Election Day underscore the magnitude of the challenges that President-elect Biden will face when he assumes office in January. Even as he seeks to reclaim and rebuild America's claims to international leadership, his first order priorities must be to combat the pandemic (to be bolstered by the near-term availability of several very promising vaccines); to undertake the revival of the American economy; and to reestablish normalcy in American civic life. These do not make the Biden Administration's external priorities unimportant, but the U.S. will be unable to lead abroad if it cannot lead at home.

## What the Trump Administration Leaves Behind

Donald Trump will leave office as the most disruptive president in the history of U.S. foreign policy. (Time does not allow for a comparable accounting of the effects of his presidency on America's domestic politics and institutional integrity.) Trump's disdain for alliances; his contempt for multilateralism and withdrawal from negotiated international agreements; his adherence to stark, highly predatory views of international politics; his overt preference for authoritarian, anti-democratic leaders; his insistence on "America first" and mercantilist policies; and his dismissiveness of scientific expertise and economic logic have been evident from the very outset of his administration. With few exceptions, America's alliance relationships and international partnerships have been badly undermined, with the U.S. president no longer willing to uphold principles and policies integral to the international order developed since the end of World War II.

The Republic of Korea has been repeatedly at the center of Trump's animus toward alliances. Like many U.S. allies, especially in Asia and the Pacific, President Moon Jae-in went to ample lengths to conciliate Trump, frequently including displays of flattery and deference. Heightened purchases of high end, very costly U.S. weapon systems were an additional means to mollify the U.S. president. But Trump's repeated questioning of the purposes of the alliance; his periodic threats to withdraw U.S. forces from the peninsula; and his demands for massive, unwarranted increases in the ROK's contributions to host nation support challenged the essential alliance bargain: by definition, it cannot be a one-way street. Trump's animus toward alliances reflected his belief that they are inherently unfair to the United States, and are rooted in Trump's long-held grievances about trade imbalances. The U.S. commitment to shared values and interests has been almost entirely lacking in the past four years, swamped in a torrent of transactional thinking.

Trump's overtures to Kim Jong-un dominated his views of the Korean Peninsula during much of his tenure in the White House. Though Moon Jae-in believed these actions would help advance his pursuit of improved inter-Korean relations, these efforts remain wholly unrealized at the end of 2020. Moreover, Trump's outreach to North Korea has been equally unfulfilled. Undertaken impulsively, without meaningful deliberation or consultation among his senior advisers, Trump's overtures to Kim have proven little more than a failed gamble, with a global television audience in mind. He offered the North's young leader personal validation that neither his grandfather nor father were able to achieve with a serving U.S. president.

However, Trump gave minimal attention to the requirements of denuclearization, or even on how to define it. He had no discernible "asks" of Kim. Trump's offer in Singapore of unilateral concessions on U.S. military exercises and his willingness to sign an end of war declaration (all in the absence of discernible steps by North Korea to curtail its nuclear or missile ambitions) were to Kim's pronounced advantage. The failure of the second summit in Hanoi appears to have stymied some of these developments. But Trump leaves the White House with North Korea's pursuit of an operational nuclear weapons capability much closer to fruition, without Pyongyang in any way constrained in pursuit of its enduring strategic goals, potentially involving major risks to Northeast Asian security as well as to the United States.

## The Road Ahead

The upheaval in U.S. policy making over the past four years requires review of how America's East Asian allies and partners perceive the U.S. in the aftermath of the Trump Administration. Will the damage to the U.S. "brand name" prove lasting, or is America's reputation recoverable under a very different president? What remedial actions must be taken to prevent further damage to America's international reputation? Or is the centrality of the United States to international peace and security simply too great for any regional actors to challenge the U.S. role? Is there an alternative strategic rationale to sustain America's alliances that could garner ample domestic support in the U.S. and among its major security partners, including the ROK?

The possibilities of political and strategic realignment (if not outright detachment from American power) are more conceivable than at any point since the United States first sought to organize a concept of regional order following the end of war in the Pacific. The institutions and relationships formed in the early post-war years quickly became part of the bipolar Cold War system in Asia. Incremental change nonetheless proved possible, as development and democratization spread across the region and enabled regional actors to make larger contributions to international peace and security.

Though China was outside the U.S.-led Asian security system for two full decades, the Sino-American accommodation of the 1970s enabled a redefinition of regional relations that extended to China, especially in economic and diplomatic terms.

However, China's reemergence over the past two decades as a more fully arrived economic, diplomatic and military power and its heightened geopolitical ambitions has altered the strategic equation. Unlike seventy years ago, the United States is no longer a singular global actor, and China is now a rival great power, intent on securing its interests along its periphery and beyond. Both states seem certain to remain the world's leading powers, with middle and small powers wedged uncomfortably between them. Allies and partners, though wary of the long-term implications of the growth of Chinese power, have a voice and vote of their own, and do not want to be compelled to make choices that could prove harmful to their interests. As a consequence, hedging and counterbalancing are now more evident, not as an alternative to the United States but as a supplement under conditions of increased uncertainty.

We should anticipate increasing debate between the U.S. and its major regional allies on visions of the future, though the Biden Administration will seek to counteract some of these potential differences. Can the U.S. and the ROK agree to an equitable, sustainable and legitimate division of labor in which both fully concur? Quite apart from the controversies of the past four years, this represents a major challenge. For example, Moon Jae-in's pursuit of a "Korea only" vision of the peninsula's future independent of the DPRK's nuclear and missile ambitions is deeply disquieting to many in the United States. Some Korean scholars seem to believe that formulaic definitions of denuclearization (as distinct from verifiable steps in the denuclearization process) should suffice to justify accommodation with the DPRK. But magical thinking, even if it is adorned in the elaborated security architecture language, is a poor substitute for candidly addressing the enduring challenges posed by North Korea's nuclear ambitions. The illusion of denuclearization is unacceptable to the United States and it should be equally unacceptable to the ROK.

President-elect Biden has already affirmed that alliances will remain the bedrock of U.S. regional strategy. Public support in the ROK for close relations with the United States remains very robust, reflecting a broad consensus within Korea that it enhances economic well-being and national security. But what kind of alliance do Washington and Seoul seek? Threat driven conceptions of the alliance dominated ROK-U.S. relations under conditions of bipolarity, but these conditions do not conform to extant economic, geographic, and strategic realities in relation to China. A more differentiated concept would enable competition as well as cooperation with Beijing and would be decidedly preferable to adversarial conceptions of East Asian security.

These issues also bear upon the possibilities of a *modus vivendi* between Korea and Japan. American presidents have long been frustrated by the unwillingness or inability of these two leading industrial democracies—both close U.S. allies and near neighbors in Northeast Asia—to resolve their enduring historical grievances, and to curtail unhealthy competitive impulses directed at each other. Without the will and commitment of leaders in Seoul and Tokyo, it has proven impossible to build and sustain political and security cooperation that would benefit the interests of both countries. There are tentative indications that leaders in both capitals are prepared to explore some of these differences, but the possibilities should not be exaggerated. It is far too early to conclude that these will have lasting effects, and any accommodation could be easily impaled in the domestic politics of both systems, especially with impending changes in leadership.

This issue could confront the Biden Administration, as well. Will it be content to sustain separate, bilateral relationships with Seoul and Tokyo, or will it more actively press both capitals to advance understandings less encumbered by history and nationalistic pride? It is too soon to know the answer, but this could reveal much about the new administration's intentions and policy goals in East Asia.

## The China Question

The Biden Administration will also need to confront lasting challenges in relation to China. The deterioration in U.S.-China relations under the Trump Administration has been profound, though it also reflects an increasing shift in U.S. thinking about China in both political parties and in U.S. public opinion. The question is not whether there will be “strategic competition” between Washington and Beijing, but what kind of competition. The core questions concern the boundaries of U.S.-China rivalry; whether there are viable means to manage competition; the areas where cooperation remains essential; and the potential risks if both powers prove incapable of controlling their more intensely competitive instincts and practices. Korea will be at or near the center of many of these issues.

China policy in the Trump Administration, especially in the administration's final year in power, has been a race to the bottom, as if little or nothing was at risk. Senior officials, most notably Secretary of State Pompeo, repeatedly and incessantly characterized China as an “existential threat” to American long-term interests, claiming that Beijing's fundamental goal is to displace the United States as the world's preeminent power and to impose its own version of global governance. In innumerable speeches and policy documents, the outgoing administration espoused an “all of government” approach intended to block China's power advances; to inhibit by all possible means its technological

and economic progress; to subject China to searing ideological critiques comparable to the most totalistic accusations of the early Cold War; and to undertake wherever possible crusade-like approaches to international strategy.

Even if many of these formulations were intended to serve the administration's domestic political goals, U.S. policy has often seemed more disruptive than purposeful, all in the absence of an identifiable or coherent strategic purpose. Some observers argue that the administration's ultimate purpose is to isolate and delegitimize China's government, in which none of Beijing's neighbors (including the ROK) have any interest. This does not mean that nearby powers are untroubled by China's power, ambitions, and conduct. Under Xi Jinping, Chinese politics have turned increasingly regressive and repressive. Actions directed against the Uighur minority in Xinjiang are alarming, and the severe crackdowns against the citizens of Hong Kong are deeply disquieting. Despite China's expressed desire for a larger voice and role in global and regional affairs, its conduct suggests an ever more fearful leadership relying increasingly on coercion and intimidation as a political tool, first and foremost against its own citizens.

President-elect Biden and his foreign policy advisors must weigh their policy options in light of the Trump Administration's efforts to consolidate an overtly adversarial stance toward China. A principal challenge is whether the two sides can diminish the possibilities of military confrontation on China's doorstep, without negating policies governing the deployment and operation of U.S. forces in the West Pacific and support for U.S. allies and security partners. At the same time, the reprisals and counter reprisals between the U.S. and China on trade and investment across East Asia are viewed by neighboring states with increased disquiet, lest they inflict lasting damage on the multilateral trade regime.

The more enduring questions confronting the U.S. and China concern the longer term. Will either leadership prove capable of articulating a vision of regional order that can accommodate to their respective expectations and needs, and over what range of issues? To what extent will China's domestic political practices preclude lasting accommodation? Alternatively, will increasing Chinese objections to U.S. intrusiveness on matters that Beijing deems matters of national sovereignty set limits on Chinese cooperation with the United States? It seems beyond imagination that either power would seek to exclude the other from a major role in the future regional order. But can the United States accept China as a co-equal major power, and can China accept the legitimacy of the U.S. political-military presence in East Asia, especially in relation to its core alliances? What would any such arrangement presume about the capacity of other actors to protect their own interests in such an imagined future? All such issues remain to be determined.

## North Korea: The Strategic Outlier

Joe Biden will be the sixth American president seeking to slow or inhibit North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons. These have entailed use of the full range of political, economic, security, and diplomatic tools, and none of have achieved lasting success. As a consequence, the DPRK is now much closer to a fully realized nuclear weapons capability that can threaten all the states of Northeast Asia and (prospectively) the U.S. mainland. Pyongyang insists that it is not prepared to negotiate any limits on its nuclear weapons inventory, let alone dismantle what it already possesses. It seeks full acceptance as the world's ninth nuclear-armed state. In its view, nuclear diplomacy can only be for purposes of arms control, not disarmament. Kim Jong-un also claims that (because North Korea now possesses the means of nuclear retaliation) it can deter any American attack. But its continued development efforts and the possibility of testing new, as yet untested systems indicates that it has yet to achieve what it deems necessary for its strategic needs. Moreover, the DPRK remains unwilling to forego continued weapons development in favor of pressing economic and societal needs. At times, Pyongyang insists upon the removal of multilateral sanctions that it claims have had a crippling effect on its long-term development.

In their more candid moments, senior North Korean officials (including Kim Jong-un) have acknowledged the regime's vulnerabilities and weaknesses. It remains an acutely damaged society. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, it insists on the right to be left alone, and sealed off, which the pandemic has reinforced to an unusual degree. Its weakness is its strength, but its unwavering commitment to weapons development must be considered its ultimate source of vulnerability. Proudful, adversarial nationalism dominates the thinking of the top elites, even in relation to China, upon whom North Korea necessarily must depend.

The Biden Administration's most important policy priority must be to rebuild alliance relations with Seoul and Tokyo that were badly tattered during Donald Trump's failed gamble with Pyongyang. This must include reaffirmation of America's deterrence and defense commitments, and a readiness to weigh renewed cooperation with China, premised on complementary interests in nuclear non-proliferation and reducing the risks of instability and crisis on the peninsula. The only viable path is to assemble and sustain a coalition among the ROK, Japan, and China, the states most directly affected by Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear weapons development. Any effort to ignore or marginalize China's role in Korea would be doomed to failure. China's immediate geographic proximity to the peninsula; its economic centrality to both North and South; and its enduring strategic interests render its exclusion impossible. But these will all remain very daunting tasks.

At bottom, should any of the states of Northeast Asia or the U.S. be prepared to acquiesce to

the permanence of the North's weapons capabilities? How would other states respond to any such acquiescence? Would longer-term regional order even be imaginable with a nuclear-armed North? How, in particular, could ultimate unification be envisioned in the face of such possibilities? These questions must never be ignored in any deliberations about the peninsular and the regional future, no matter how remote the prospects might seem at present for a denuclearized North.



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