

# A Beginning of New Global Partnership? The ROK-US Relations under Biden and Moon

Seong-Ho Sheen

After four years of unorthodox presidency by Donald Trump, Americans elected Joe Biden, a seasoned politician and a moderate liberal, as the 46<sup>th</sup> president of the United States in 2020. Among others, Biden came to office pledging to restore American leadership on the global stage, saying America is back at the table. In the meantime, Biden's counterpart in Seoul, President Moon Jae-in, was in his final year in office as South Korea elected a new president from the opposition People's Power Party in March 2022. Over the past five years, Moon worked hard to establish good relations with both the Trump and Biden administrations, while pushing for his peace initiative with North Korea. However, Moon's plans to restart inter-Korean dialogue and economic cooperation failed as North Korea upped the ante with its new round of missile testing against Biden's strategic patience on the nuclear issue. Meanwhile, Seoul came under increasing pressure from intensifying US-China competition as the Biden administration doubled down on the Indo-Pacific strategy of characterizing China as a major threat. In this context, Moon's first summit meeting with President Biden came as a critical test for the ROK-US alliance as well as US-North Korea policy under the new Biden administration. After their summit in May 2021, Moon and Biden announced the beginning of a "new chapter" in bilateral relationship, in which the allies would look beyond the Korean peninsula—and their security relationship—to tap new opportunities for collaboration. The United States and South Korea agreed to find new ways to harmonize their signature regional initiatives—the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision and the New Southern Policy, respectively—in pursuit of "regional coordination on law enforcement, cybersecurity, public health, and promoting a green recovery." South Korea overcame some of its concerns about the Quad, and opened the door to cooperation in some form. Significantly, the two allies outlined an extensive package of joint projects on various global issues such as combating climate change and advancing decarbonization; accelerating the production and global distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and strengthening global public health institutions; and the development of "critical and emerging technologies." The Moon-Biden summit was a significant landmark for the U.S.-ROK alliance. History may judge the Moon-Biden summit as the beginning of a new era of ROK-US partnership that Seoul can play a greater role in managing the challenges beyond the Korean peninsula in coordination with the United States and other democracies.

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## INTRODUCTION

After four years of unorthodox presidency by Donald Trump, the American public elected Joe Biden, a seasoned politician and a moderate liberal, as the 46<sup>th</sup> president of the United States in 2020. Among others, Biden came to office pledging to restore American leadership on the global stage, saying America is back at the table. Amid domestic challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic, economic downturn, and racial division, Biden also faced many difficult issues in foreign policy, including competition with China, setting new position with Russia's aggressive behaviors, restoring alliance partnership, climate change, ending the Afghan war, and so forth. The Korean peninsula and the North Korean nuclear issue will remain major foreign policy challenges for the Biden administration. In the meantime, Biden's counterpart in Seoul, President Moon Jae-in, was in his last year in office, with South Korea electing a new president from the opposition People's Power Party in March 2022. Over the past five years, Moon worked hard to establish good relations with both the Trump and Biden administrations while pushing for his peace initiative with North Korea. Even though Trump once threatened North Korean leader Kim Jong-un with full scale nuclear war while criticizing Seoul for not paying enough for US military protection, Moon managed to induce an unprecedented US–North Korea summit in Singapore in June 2018 and in Hanoi in February 2019. However, Moon's drive for ending the Korean war followed by a peace treaty among parties involved fell short of making any progress in nuclear talks between Pyongyang and Washington. Moon's plans to restart inter-Korean dialogue and economic cooperation failed as North Korea upped the ante with its new rounds of missile testing against Biden's strategic patience on the nuclear issue. Meanwhile, Seoul came under increasing pressure from intensifying US–China competition as the Biden administration doubled down on the Indo-Pacific strategy of characterizing China as a major threat. In this context, Moon's first summit meeting with President Biden came as a critical test for the ROK–US alliance as well as the US–North Korea policy under the new Biden administration. This paper will first discuss Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy. The second part will analyze the first summit between Biden and Moon in May 2021. The third section will discuss South Korea's "new Southern Policy" under the Moon government. Finally, the paper will examine Moon's defense reform and its longer-term impact on the ROK–US alliance in the coming years.

## BIDEN'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY AND QUAD

The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy has five characteristics. First, it seeks to restore the traditional US leadership along with the liberal international order. Biden's first executive order was to revive the Paris Climate Agreement that was abandoned by

President Trump. Essentially, Biden advocates the importance of multilateralism and US leadership in resolving various transnational issues such as climate change and global pandemics (Biden, 2020). Second, like his predecessor, Biden continues to consider China and its behavior the most important threat to US national security. President Biden declares that the world is at an inflection point in the Interim Guidelines for National Security Strategy, and the strategic competition with China that threatens the existing Liberal International Order (LIO) is a threat to U.S. national security (The White House, 2020; 2021). The situation calls for a joint response by allies and the league of democracy to this significant power transition and the instability associated with the rise of China. Third, Biden also emphasizes empowering the US alliance partnership. In a stark contrast to his predecessor, who viewed allies as a burden, the Biden administration says allies such as NATO, Japan, Australia, and South Korea are the greatest strategic asset for the US. In particular, Biden says that it will deal with China from the position of strength through cooperation with various partner countries in the Indo-Pacific region (The White House, 2022). Fourth, the key element of US–China strategic competition is in the economic and technological fields. The Biden administration’s emphasis on a stable supply chain reflects the importance of the fourth industrial revolution technology, such as AI, 5G, and semiconductors in US competition with China, which focuses on the same area with rapidly growing capacity since the 2008 financial crisis. President Biden especially advocates the need for supply chain and high-tech cooperation among democratic countries. In this regard, South Korea has become an important partner for the US as Korean industries have emerged as leaders in semiconductors, secondary batteries, and bioscience (Campbell and Sullivan, 2019). Fifth, Biden’s Indo-Pacific policy is driven by his focus on improving the quality of life of the US middle class as a key pillar of the administration’s overall foreign policy. Biden promises that any foreign policy decisions should be made in a manner that would be beneficial to the interests of the American people, especially the middle class. US foreign and trade policy should contribute to job creation in the US and should not harm domestic workers due to the establishment of unbalanced trade relations (Blinken, 2021; Baer, 2021; Ahmed et al., 2020). It is ironic that Biden’s policy echoes what President Trump used to say about American economic interest. Nevertheless, it is also understandable, given that traditional industries have been severely damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For his new Indo-Pacific strategy, Biden created a new position of “Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific” in his National Security Council at the White House and appointed Kurt Campbell, former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs and the architect of Asia-Pivot strategy under the Obama Administration. Campbell, known as the “Asia-Czar” to be in charge of China and the Indo-Pacific policy, argued that the US strategy should focus on issue-specific areas such as trade, advanced technology, global supply chain, with a flexible approach rather than sweeping competition with China in a Cold War manner (Campbell and Doshi, 2021). Accordingly, the Biden administration is using the QUAD, the four-party consultative body of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, as its core mechanism in checking China’s power and ambition in the region. Shortly after assuming office, Biden held a QUAD Foreign Ministers Meeting on February 18, 2021, to discuss concrete agenda for cooperation.

Soon the first QUAD Summit was held via video conference on March 12, 2021, immediately after the ministerial meeting. The Biden administration made it clear that it wants to use QUAD in the future to establish a multilateral cooperation system to contain China in the field of military security. Furthermore, it was also confirmed that QUAD is attempting to expand the scope of its agenda into functional issues such as health and security, telecommunication (5G) technology, trade, high-tech supply chains, as well as joint efforts to fight the pandemic (The White House, 2021).

The expansion of the QUAD agenda beyond military issues reflects Washington's intention to reduce the diplomatic burden on countries like India and other countries in the region by easing the pressure of anti-China rhetoric. After the summit, the White House defined the QUAD as a consultative body among democratic countries aiming for more comprehensive cooperation beyond the China military issue. The Biden administration hopes that more partners and allies in the region would participate in the QUAD effort (Choe, 2021). The US wants to expand QUAD activities with other ASEAN member-states such as Vietnam and Singapore as well as other Asian allies including South Korea and New Zealand. ASEAN countries have been pessimistic about the Trump administration's QUAD promotion as they considered the initiative too much confrontational with China, which has become an increasingly important economic partner in the region (Ford, 2020). However, it is not yet clear as to how the ASEAN will respond to Biden administration's call for multilateral cooperation in non-military areas with QUAD members (Stromseth, 2021; EAF, 2022).

## **MOON-BIDEN MEETING AND US POLICY TOWARD THE KOREAN PENINSULA**

The first summit meeting between Moon and Biden in Washington in May 2021 turned out to be a great success, with both exhibiting good chemistry and issuing a joint statement that signaled a new era of US-ROK alliance. Especially given that the meeting came a month after Biden's summit with Japanese Prime Minister Suga, the media was quick to compare the two summits as if there was competition between Seoul and Tokyo vying for Washington's favor. Obviously, Suga's visit marked Biden's first meeting with a foreign leader since he assumed office in February. Moon was the second foreign leader Biden had invited to White House. No European leader, including countries like United Kingdom, France and Germany, let alone Canada and Mexico, came before Moon and Suga. It showed that the Biden administration is taking East Asia seriously in its efforts to rebuild alliance partnership. Tokyo and Seoul endured heavy pressure by Trump's demand for a steep increase in their burden sharing. Rebuilding trust with the two key Asian allies could be seen as Biden's effort to send a signal to the world and especially to Beijing that America is back. In this regard, the fact that Moon was the second foreign leader to be invited to the White House demonstrated the newly elevated importance of South Korea as a key ally along with Japan.

In his meeting with Moon, Biden's policy toward the Korean peninsula highlighted the following priorities. The first priority is to deal with North Korea's nuclear ambition. Its obvious goal is denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Shortly after President

Biden's inauguration, his administration launched a North Korea policy review. In late April 2021, the administration announced that it had completed its review, and that it will be a "calibrated, practical approach that is open to and will explore diplomacy with North Korea" to eventually achieve the "complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" (Blinken, 2021). The administration will seek to take with North Korea "practical measures that can help ... make progress along the way towards that goal." When asked about the strategy, White House Spokesperson Jen Psaki said it will neither be a Trump style "grand bargain," nor "strategic patience" taken by Obama. Psaki added that Washington will consult with Seoul and other allies at every step along the way (ABC News, 2021; The White House, 2021).

Originally, there were concerns in South Korea that Biden's more principled approach to North Korea and its leader Kim Jong-un would create more tension with Pyongyang. However, in their joint statement, Biden acknowledged the 2018 Panmunjom Joint Declaration between Moon and Kim and the Singapore Joint Statement between Trump and Kim as the basis for the ongoing diplomatic initiative with Pyongyang, an important signal for Moon's peace initiative on the Korean peninsula (The White House, 2021).<sup>1</sup> It was remarkable for Biden to accept Trump's meeting with Kim as a legitimate element in the US policy toward Pyongyang. First, it recognized the validity of the promise made by Trump on the possible US–North Korea diplomatic normalization as well as building a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula, in return for North Korea's denuclearization. Second, it also signaled that Biden himself would be willing to meet with Kim if Pyongyang reciprocated with certain progress in nuclear negotiation. As such, it showed that Biden is not going to completely reverse Trump's policy toward North Korea, unlike many other issues where he strongly opposed Trump's approach throughout the presidential race.

Second, Biden ensured that he wanted to restore and strengthen alliance partnership with South Korea. Throughout the campaign, Biden criticized Trump for weakening US alliance partnership with Europe and Asia. He vowed to bring the US leadership back by restoring its commitment to US allies. In particular, given the intensifying US–China strategic competition, Biden was keen on restoring partnership with Asian allies including South Korea and Japan. Immediately after Biden assumed office, the US and South Korea reached an agreement on SMA (a military burden sharing) that has been long overdue under the previous Trump administration. Washington accepted Seoul's offer of a 13 percent increase in burden sharing over a five-year term. The increase was modest compared to Trump's demand for 500 percent increase with a one-year deal. A U.S. State Department spokesperson said the agreement shows the Biden administration's "commitment to reinvigorating and modernizing our democratic alliances around the world" (Shin, 2021). The agreement was followed by the first visit to Seoul in March by Biden's top security team, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. Blinken and Austin met with South Korea's Minister of

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<sup>1</sup> The statement reads "We also 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."

Foreign Affairs Chung Eui-yong and Minister of National Defense Suh Wook in a joint "2+2" session. In a joint statement, they said the alliance between their countries "has never been more important" in the midst of increasing global threats. Welcoming the delegates at Blue House, President Moon said "having been a partner for seven decades, sharing values and philosophy on democracy and human rights, ROK and the US will continue to act together on shared challenges, including a thorough cooperation for a complete denuclearization and permanent peace in the Korean Peninsula" (Yeung and Seo, 2021). In a joint statement after the summit in May, Biden and Moon pledged their recommitment to "an ironclad alliance" and announced "a partnership that continues to provide peace and prosperity for our peoples, while serving as a linchpin for the regional and global order" (The White House, 2021). Biden surprised Moon with his offer to provide South Korean military with half-a-million doses of the much-needed Covid vaccine amidst global shortage. However, another important support and partnership for ROK military came with the US decision to lift the 42-year-old ban on South Korea's development of ballistic missiles that can reach beyond the Korean peninsula.

Third, checking the Chinese influence on the peninsula would be another priority in the broader Indo-Pacific strategy. The joint statement did not explicitly mention China—in contrast to the U.S.—Japan joint statement between Biden and Suga, which explicitly criticized Beijing on many issues (The White House, 2021). Nevertheless, the statement was more critical of the Chinese government's behavior than previous such documents. In the statement, the United States and South Korea stated their opposition to "all activities that undermine, destabilize, or threaten the rules-based international order" and voiced their commitment to maintain peace and stability and defend international rules and norms in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait (The White House, 2021). This was the first time a ROK–U.S. joint statement has included reference to Taiwan. Chinese authorities shortly responded with a certain concern. "There was no mention of China, but it's not that (Beijing) is unaware it is targeting China," said Xing Haiming, China's ambassador to South Korea after the summit (Yonhap, 2021). China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Zhao Lijian urged the two countries to "speak and act prudentially on the Taiwan question and refrain from playing with fire" (Onchi, 2021). Notwithstanding the new tone, it is unlikely that South Korea will embrace an overtly competitive approach to China in the near term. Following the Moon–Biden summit, South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong sought to reassure Beijing that Seoul was not "interfering in China's internal affairs" (Yonhap, 2021). South Korea remains heavily dependent on China trade which is bigger than the combined volume of trade with the US and Japan, leaving it vulnerable to another economic pressure campaign. The South Korean society has been moving toward the direction where it wants more autonomy and expects a more independent voice from the United States.

Fourth, Biden sought active cooperation with South Korea in the economic sector. South Korea, with a population of fifty million, ranks number nine in terms of GDP according to OECD in 2020. South Korea's manufacturing sector is ranked fifth, after China, the U.S., Japan, and Germany. Its economy is led by a well-balanced combination of leading industrial sectors in the age of the fourth industrial revolution. South Korea is among the top global producers of steel, automobiles, shipbuilding, semiconductors, telecommunications, electric car batteries, renewable energy and biosimilar. According



to Bloomberg, South Korea is ranked number one in terms of innovation, being equipped with the world's fastest nationwide internet service, and aggressive investment in R&D (Jamrisko, Lu, and Tanzi, 2021). Given Biden's emphasis on technological competition with China, South Korea can be an important partner for the US industry. In their summit meeting, the two leaders agreed to work together on future-oriented innovation in the areas of clean energy, such as next generation batteries, hydrogen, and carbon capture and storage, and in emerging technologies including Artificial Intelligence (AI), 5G, next generation communications network (6G), open-RAN technology, quantum technology, and bio-technology.

Accordingly, they agreed to cooperate to increase resilience in their supply chains, including in priority sectors such as semiconductors, eco-friendly EV batteries, strategic and critical materials, and pharmaceuticals through the promotion of increased mutual investments as well as research and development cooperation (The White House, 2021). During Moon's visit to Washington, four major South Korean companies, including Samsung and SK, announced plans to invest US\$39.4 billion in the United States (Yonhap, 2021). In a joint business roundtable attended by Moon, Samsung Electronics announced plans to invest US\$17 billion in a new foundry plant. LG Energy Solution and SK innovation, which make batteries, said they plan to invest about US\$14 billion in individual and joint projects, while Hyundai Motor announced plans to invest US\$7.4 billion in expanding the electric vehicle (EV) production and recharging infrastructure in the U.S. After the summit, Moon visited a plant construction site of SK Innovation in Atlanta, Georgia. The company is investing around US\$2.6 billion in the EV battery sector. "This plant symbolizes friendship and high-tech cooperation between South Korea and the United States," Moon said in a speech. Moon's visit was welcomed by all the local politicians, including two newly elected Democrat senators and incumbent Republican governor of Georgia, a key battleground for the presidential and senate race in 2020 (Yonhap, 2021).

Concurrently, Biden wanted South Korea to play a greater role in tackling global challenges. Moon and Biden committed to forging new ties on climate change and global health. The agenda included net zero greenhouse gas emissions, collaboration on green technology, KORUS Global Vaccine Partnership, COVAX, reforming WHO, Global Health Security Agenda. Biden also welcomed South Korea's role in development aid to Central America's Northern Triangle countries, Latin America and the Caribbean region, promotion of human rights and empowering women and girls. The expanding role of South Korea in US global strategy was vindicated just a month later at the G7 meeting held in Great Britain in June. South Korea was invited by Prime Minister Boris Johnson to the meeting as one of the four observatory members. South Korea was the only non-member country of the British Commonwealth system with India, Australia, and South Africa. The joint statement highlighted South Korea's commitment to the promotion of global agenda such as democracy, public health, and climate change (European Council, 2021).

## SOUTH KOREA'S NEW SOUTHERN POLICY AND INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

The Moon government announced the New Southern Policy in November 2017 and has been promoting multidimensional cooperation with ASEAN and India. The New Southern Policy is composed of three pillars (People, Prosperity, and Peace) under the vision of “a people-centered community of peace and prosperity” (Choe, 2021). While Seoul's ASEAN policies in the past focused on export promotion and Korean companies' entry into the market, the New Southern Policy focused on expanding mutual awareness through mutually beneficial economic cooperation with ASEAN and revitalizing human and cultural exchanges. In addition, it has been seeking to expand diplomatic and defense cooperation with ASEAN in order to establish a safe and peaceful regional environment. Initially, the New Southern Policy consisted of 16 strategic tasks and 57 key projects in celebration of the 3Ps, but it was expanded and reorganized to 19 strategic tasks and 92 key projects by reflecting the results of the 2019 ASEAN–Korea Commemorative Summit.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to building the People community, it includes not only human and cultural exchanges, but also a number of projects related to improving the quality of life of the people of ASEAN countries, strengthening human resource capabilities, and promoting governance. The Win–Win Prosperity Community focuses on promoting mutually beneficial trade and investment with ASEAN countries, developing infrastructure, and strengthening future industry cooperation. The Peace Community aims to contribute to regional security by building a platform for peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia based on peace on the Korean peninsula and strengthening cooperation in natural disaster and disaster response, counter-terrorism, and cyber and maritime security.

In particular, the “New Southern Policy Plus” announced on the occasion of the ASEAN–Korea Summit in November 2020 is a prime example of the Korean government's commitment to continue and strengthen cooperation with ASEAN despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of COVID-19 not only increased the global demand for health cooperation, but also led to deepening protectionism and a demand for the reorganization of the global value chain, which further highlighted the need for strategic cooperation with the ASEAN countries. In addition, as the transition to the digital economy following the fourth industrial revolution such as 5G and AI accelerates, the demand for cooperation in digital and future industries and digital divide further increased. Furthermore, the economic and health crisis triggered by the pandemic threatens the survival of the vulnerable population, further increasing the need to strengthen cooperation in human security. ASEAN has already been exposed to various non-traditional security threats, such as climate change, natural and human disasters, and infectious diseases. Under these circumstances, the Moon government

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<sup>2</sup> New Southern Special Committee (2019) 「Agenda for the 4th Meeting of the New Southern Policy Special Committee」 In the existing 16 strategic tasks, separate cooperative projects with the Mekong region and India were added.



reviewed the achievements of the New Southern Policy in 2020, the third year of policy implementation, and released the “New Southern Policy Plus” reflecting the changes in the external environment and new demands for cooperation after the outbreak of the pandemic (Kim, 2021; Lee and Yoon, 2021).

The key areas of cooperation under the New Southern Policy Plus are very similar to the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF), which is ASEAN's COVID-19 exit strategy. In November 2020, ASEAN prepared the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF), which is a measure to respond to COVID-19 at the ASEAN community level. ACRF presented five strategies: ① improving the health system ② strengthening human security ③ maximizing ASEAN market potential and deepening economic integration ④ accelerating inclusive digital innovation ⑤ making a sustainable and resilient future leap forward and preparing detailed implementation strategies. South Korea tried to coordinate its New Southern Policy with the US Indo-Pacific Strategy in a manner to reflect such ASEAN demands (La, 2021). The ROK and the US held the “Korea–US ASEAN Policy Dialogue” in May 2021 and discussed concrete ways to cooperate with each other in Southeast Asia. The common agenda for cooperation included supporting ASEAN's overcoming the pandemic and strengthening the health system, joint infrastructure projects, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, such as commercialization of CCUS (CO<sub>2</sub> capture, use, and storage) technology, supporting the digital transformation to strengthen ASEAN's cyber capabilities, water resource management in the Mekong region, and cooperation in non-traditional security areas, such as protecting the maritime environment, capacity building against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (MOFA, 2021).

The Biden administration would welcome increasing partnership with South Korea in broader regional and global issues beyond the Korean peninsula. In particular, a noticeable outcome of the Moon–Biden summit was the higher level of agreement on the bilateral cooperation for the US's Indo-Pacific initiative. The two leaders said that “the significance of the U.S.–ROK relationship extends far beyond the Korean peninsula,” and that they agreed to work together “to align the ROK's New Southern Policy and the United States' vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific” and cooperate to “create a safe, prosperous, and dynamic region.” The alignment of the two countries' regional policies was not new as the same statement was made by both Moon and Trump. What was special this time was Moon's commitment “to oppose all activities that undermine, destabilize or threaten the rule-based international order” as part of efforts “to [maintain] an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific.” It also talked about maintaining lawful unimpeded commerce, and respect for international law, including freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea and beyond” (The White House, 2021).

It was quite surprising that the language that Washington uses in its Indo-Pacific narratives was directly applied in the Moon–Biden summit documents without any modifications. Previously, the Moon government tried to distance itself from the tone of the US Indo-Pacific strategy (Choe, 2021). However, one should not expect that Seoul will directly support US efforts to confront or contain China in the region. For example, the US–ROK Joint Statement touched upon the issue of human rights without mentioning “Xinjiang and Hong Kong.” Instead, the two allies discussed cooperation with other regional partners in ASEAN, the Mekong sub-region, and Pacific Island

on the issue of development, climate change, etc. It appears that Moon tried to limit its support for the US Indo-Pacific agenda at a level that would be tolerable to China. Specifically, the Moon government may support universal principles, such as freedom of the sea and peaceful resolution of disputes, in the language of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. Nevertheless, it tried to avoid direct involvement in US efforts to confront or encircle China in the South China Sea or the East China Sea using military means. In this regard, joining the QUAD was largely seen as premature for the Moon government. While the conservatives tended to see it as a testament to strengthening the alliance with Washington, the progressive liberals were worried that the QUAD membership will send the wrong message to Beijing that Seoul is supporting the US containment policy against China.

Instead of focusing on sensitive security issues, Seoul and Washington should promote cooperation in areas where there are corresponding demands from other countries in the region. It is necessary to prepare concrete practical cooperation plans focusing on the key areas of cooperation agreed upon by Korea and the United States. Simultaneously, they should propose cooperative projects that may have a high possibility of creating synergies between the two countries. In particular, such areas of cooperation should reflect the demand for cooperation in the ASEAN Outlook of Indo-Pacific and the ACRF, a framework for coping with Covid-19. Such areas of trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the US, and ASEAN could include infrastructure/connectivity, smart city, energy, digital economy, Health, Climate/Environment, Cyber Security, and Maritime Security.

## **ROK-US ALLIANCE IN TRANSFORMATION**

Even though the Moon–Biden summit was largely successful, the two allies needed to address certain concerns and differences in their position regarding key policy issues. The first is managing North Korea and nuclear negotiation. Despite the common goal of denuclearization, Washington and Seoul seemed to have different priorities in dealing with Pyongyang. President Moon invested heavily on engaging North Korea in order to maintain the peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. However, Biden's more principled approach, i.e., no grand bargain, only invited strong skepticism and rejection of talks from Pyongyang. Instead Kim's "new path" makes clear that he will accelerate his nuclear program if the United States does not give him what he demands. The two allies need to find a middle ground to restart diplomacy with Pyongyang before it is too late to prevent North Korea from becoming a permanently nuclear-armed state. It was refreshing to hear Biden would be willing to meet Kim under the right conditions—if there was a commitment from the North Korean leader "that there's discussion about his nuclear arsenal during his joint press conference with Moon" (ABC News, 2021). With Biden's support, Moon hoped to broker another US–North Korea summit by providing much-needed food and medical aid to North Korea on a humanitarian basis. North Korea was reportedly facing a serious economic crisis and food shortage amidst the ongoing pandemic (Choe, 2021). Moon's final push for a diplomatic breakthrough failed as Kim seemed to focus more on rallying its domestic crowds rather than reaching out

to the outside world.

The second is the alliance transformation suited for 21<sup>st</sup> century security dynamics on the Korean peninsula. South Korea obviously welcomes the Biden's alliance policy in general. President Moon regarded the ROK-US alliance as the key pillar of South Korea's security interest. During his meeting with the US commander in South Korea, Moon said the ROK-US alliance should play a key role in maintaining peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. He went on to say that the alliance should continue beyond Korean unification. Essentially, Biden's pledge to rebuilding alliance and returning to a leadership role in rule-based international order was a comforting sign for South Korea. The two allies need to complete the transformation of the military partnership that has been ongoing since the end of the Cold War. One of the key issues is the wartime operational control (OPCON) that has been held by the US since the Korean War. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Presidents Bill Clinton and Kim Young-sam agreed to return peacetime OPCON to South Korea in 1994. It took over a decade before President Roh Moo-hyun, in 2007, agreed with President George Bush on an initial timetable aiming for the completion of the transfer of wartime control by April 2012. The transfer has been delayed due to North Korea's nuclear tests as well as domestic politics under the conservative governments of Lee Myung-Bak and Park Geun-hye.

Assuming office following President Park's impeachment in 2017, Moon—a former top aide of President Roh—announced his new policy to expedite the OPCON transfer. As tensions were running high between Washington and Pyongyang with a war of words from both Trump and Kim Jung-un, Moon strongly underlined that war was an unacceptable outcome for South Korea. Outlining the administration's new peace initiative, he stressed that South Korea “must sit in the driver's seat and lead Korean peninsula-related issues.” Moon wanted to make South Korea a more central counterpart in negotiations with the North through the transfer. The OPCON transfer, along with a bolstered ROK military, would deter North Korean aggression and convert South Korea into a Northeast Asian security hub, Moon argued (Nordin, 2020). The Moon administration has since initiated “Defense Reform 2.0,” aiming to complete the OPCON transfer by 2022 (Jang, 2018). As part of these efforts, Moon, dubbed as a progressive liberal, has expanded the defense budget with an average annual increase of 7.5 percent, compared to 4–6 percent under the two previous conservative Lee and Park administrations (Kim, 2021). Simultaneously, consolidating national defense capabilities while pursuing peaceful engagement with North Korea are both central pillars of the Moon administration's National Security Strategy (Office of National Security, 2018). The Moon government's efforts to implement the transfer, however, was hampered by pandemic and nuclear politics with North that caused a gridlock in military exercises scheduled for verifying necessary conditions of the transfer.

Eventually, the planned OPCON transfer could not be completed during the Moon presidency. Regardless of the timing of the completion of OPCON transfer, the long term impact of the transfer will go far beyond symbolic change in command structure of the ROK-US combined forces. According to a US expert, the change in command should be understood in terms of long-term strategic transformation of the alliance. The alliance transformation reflects the mutual recognition between Seoul and Washington that the strategic environment had changed, both in terms of South Korea's place in the

world and in how the regional balance of power was evolving in the Indo-Pacific. The two allies concurred that the bulk of the combined defense of the Korean peninsula should now come from the ROK itself. Meanwhile, the planned acquisition, fielding, organization, and training improvements would empower the ROK to defend itself in all domains, allowing the country to play a middle-power role within the region, both by itself and in conjunction with other partners, including the United States. However, strategic transformation also would provide a much-needed hedge against a potentially dangerous situation where the United States, as a super power with global obligations, could one day become heavily engaged in simultaneous conflicts. If such a situation were to arise, the United States might be unable to bring the full weight of its military to the combined defense should peace and stability on the Korean peninsula or in the region be threatened (Creamer, 2021).

Biden's decision to completely withdraw US forces from Afghanistan in 2021 raised questions about US alliance commitment. Asked about the effects of the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and responses in Chinese media telling Taiwan this showed Washington could not be relied on to come to its defense, Biden replied that Taiwan, South Korea, and NATO were fundamentally different from Afghanistan. "We have made - kept every commitment. We made a sacred commitment to Article 5 that if in fact anyone were to invade or take action against our NATO allies, we would respond. Same with Japan, same with South Korea, same with - Taiwan. It's not even comparable to talk about that," Biden said (Brunnstrom, 2021). As such, an expert on US alliance in East Asia noted that confidence in U.S. commitment has not yet shaken among Korean policymakers from across the spectrum. Koreans were particularly reassured by the statement from U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan that troop withdrawal from Korea was not on the Biden agenda (Sneider, 2021).

The Afghan crisis showcased South Korea's new global activism. Ahead of Taliban's evacuation deadline for August 31st, South Korea dispatched three military airplanes to rescue 390 Afghans who supported South Korea in Afghanistan before the Taliban seized power. The evacuees include locals who worked at the South Korean embassy in Kabul, hospitals, vocational training centers, and provincial reconstruction teams. As South Korea's foreign ministry official cited the mission as the country's "moral responsibility," some South Korean lawmakers said that "Afghanistan needs the help of neighboring countries for getting immediate humanitarian aid; however, unfortunately, Europe and many surrounding nations are against accepting refugees from Afghanistan" (Choi and Chang, 2021).

Third, the Moon government wanted easing of tension between the US and China. He wanted to see the Biden administration take a more moderate, if not cooperative, approach to Beijing. There is a growing concern in Seoul that Washington is becoming too obsessed with strategic competition with China which put South Korea in a difficult position of making a choice between the two important partners. As much as Seoul appreciates the importance of alliance partnership with the US, it also perceives the growing influence of China in both economic and political issues on the Korean peninsula (Lee, 2021). China has become by far the biggest trading partner for South Korea. Despite China's unofficial sanction on South Korea over Seoul's deployment of the US missile defense system, THAAD, against North Korean missile threats, overall

trade with China remains central to South Korea. The US trade war against China created a strain on many South Korean companies for which China represents a major export market and business partner. There are growing concerns in South Korea's business community becoming a hostage to US-China strategic competition and exclusive supply chain policy. Simultaneously, it is indisputable to see Chinese interest and influence in security issues on the peninsula including nuclear and peace talks with North Korea. President Xi met with Chairman Kim five times in 2018–2019, the most among leaders of the region, including the US, South Korea, and Russia. Beijing and Pyongyang celebrated the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their mutual friendship and military partnership treaty in 2021. Beijing remains the single biggest supplier of food and energy to much impoverished and isolated North Korean regime today. Both politically and economically, Washington's aggressive policy toward Beijing complicated Seoul's strategic choice in dealing with North Korea, trade with China, alliance management, and so forth.

Nevertheless, it is possible that the Moon–Biden meeting foretold a greater willingness by South Korean officials to support the United States and other democracies against China. Beijing's multi-year economic pressure campaign against South Korea over the THAAD controversy forced both Korean elites and the Korean public to be skeptical of an ever-closer relationship with China. Opinion surveys showed that Beijing's favorability rating among the South Korean public stood at a historic low of 24 percent in 2020 (Silver, Devlin, and Huang, 2020). In addition, a survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in March 2021 showed that the majority of South Koreans view China as an economic and military threat, although a lower priority threat than falling birth rates, climate change, and North Korea (Friedhoff, 2021). These concerns have clearly given the Moon administration new space to pursue a policy of countering China's influence in the region.

Although the basic tenor of South Korea's China policy may be moderating, Washington should not expect drastic changes in the near term. If Washington pushes Seoul too hard to take a sharper approach on China, the U.S.–ROK alliance may become more strained. Instead, Washington must strengthen its alliances and suggest its democratic partners, including Seoul, to work together on regional and global challenges. Pursuing these objectives should not be explicitly about China, but they may focus on democratic leadership in supporting sustainable inclusive growth, overcoming the pandemic, addressing climate change, and promoting regional peace and stability. By providing a positive economic and values-based agenda, Washington can advance its own vision for the region without forcing allies to pick sides. While assuming office, Biden had emphasized an effort to muster the world's democracies to overcome global challenges, in the process pushing back against attempts by China, Russia, and other authoritarian countries to expand their influence. As a vibrant, prosperous democracy with a strong industrial base, South Korea has a critical role to play in realizing this vision in Asia. US commentators observed that the summit signaled that South Korea may be willing to work with the United States and other partners to compete with China in providing regional public goods. While domestic constraints make it unlikely that South Korea will pursue an overtly competitive policy toward China, Seoul began a new chapter in U.S.–ROK relations at the summit by embracing a broader role in regional



affairs (Harris and Lee, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

After their summit, Moon and Biden announced the beginning of a “new chapter” in bilateral relationship, in which the allies would look beyond the Korean peninsula—and their security relationship—to find new opportunities for collaboration. The United States and South Korea agreed to find new ways to harmonize their signature regional initiatives—the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision and the New Southern Policy, respectively—in pursuit of “regional coordination on law enforcement, cybersecurity, public health, and promoting a green recovery” (The White House, 2021). South Korea overcame some of its concerns about the Quad, and opened the door to cooperation in some form. Significantly, the two allies outlined an extensive package of joint projects on combating climate change and advancing decarbonization; accelerating the production and global distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and strengthening global public health institutions; and the development of “critical and emerging technologies.” The latter includes a pledge not only to collaborate in the development of next-generation network technologies, clean energy and battery storage, and artificial intelligence, but also to strengthen supply chain resilience for the production of semiconductors, strategic minerals, and pharmaceuticals.

With Moon’s presidential term ending in May 2022, it will be left to his successor to follow through on the vision outlined at his summit with Biden. Yoon Seok-yul, the new president-elect and former prosecutor-general appointed by Moon, has been mostly critical of the Moon administration as an opposition party candidate. The joint statement after the Yoon–Biden summit in May 2022, held during Biden’s visit to Seoul exactly a year after the Moon–Biden summit, issued a strong warning against North Korea’s continuing missile launch. While elevating the alliance as a “global comprehensive strategic alliance: beyond the Korean peninsula,” the statement made no mention of the New Southern Policy. Instead, the two leaders pledged to cooperate closely through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, a US led regional economic initiative on supply chain and technology cooperation (The White House, 2022). However, as Yoon vows to rebuild the ROK–US alliance, South Korea will find itself in an increasing partnership with the US in tackling regional and global issues. As Seoul may continue to balance its relationship with Washington and Beijing, the United States should pursue a partnership mindful of Seoul’s limits. The Moon–Biden summit was a significant landmark for the U.S.–ROK alliance and South Korean domestic politics. South Korean progressives, who have historically wanted the alliance to focus on North Korea, are becoming more open to the idea of expanding the U.S.–ROK alliance beyond the peninsula. The summit was largely seen as a great success and welcomed by both the conservatives and the progressives in Korean society. As the Biden administration showed respect for South Korea’s national interest and concern, it also reflected Seoul’s growing capacity and confidence to play a more active role in regional as well as global agenda. History may judge the Moon–Biden summit as the beginning of a new era of ROK–US partnership in that Seoul can play a greater role in managing the challenges beyond the Korean



peninsula in coordination with the United States and other democracies.

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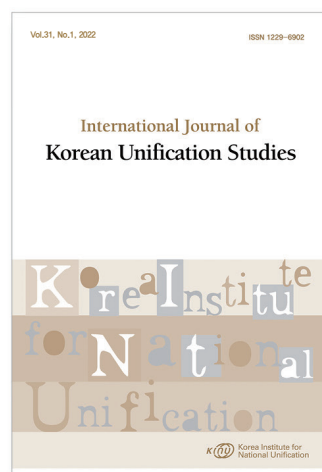
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