The Biden Administration’s North Korea Policy: A New Direction or Back to the Future?

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With the Biden administration facing a host of international and domestic challenges, North Korea policy has not been a top priority, ranking well below top tier foreign policy areas of concern such as China, Iran, Russia and climate change. However, benign neglect only goes so far with North Korea and it would be a mistake to think that the U.S. could put North Korea policy on a backburner indefinitely.

President Joe Biden does not have the luxury of time with North Korea. He needs to seize the moment and break the stalemate that has existed since 2019 with the collapse of the Hanoi summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un. Either the Biden administration takes the initiative soon in a proactive way that will allow it to set the agenda or the North Koreans will do so, by undertaking provocative actions that could include nuclear or long-range missile testing or both. This would cause the U.S. to react, thereby undermining the possibility of positive results, specifically, the easing of tensions between North Korea and the U.S. and lowering the nuclear threat the former poses. The limits to American non-engagement on critical foreign policy issues are evident in the recent violence in Israel and the Gaza Strip.

**South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s Important Role**

South Korean president Moon Jae-in knows the importance of developing and pursuing an active policy regarding North Korea. Throughout his term in office, Moon has been a key advocate of dialogue with North Korea and has played a major role in encouraging negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea as well as carrying out his own talks with North Korea. Since Biden came to office, Moon has urged the U.S. to engage in meaningful and constructive talks with North Korea and has attempted to influence the Biden administration’s policy review on North Korea towards a realistic and constructive direction.\(^1\) Moon has also entered the final year of his presidency. There is no guarantee that a successor will continue his outreach to North Korea. This highlights the narrow window of opportunity available to the Biden administration.

Moon met Biden in Washington, D.C. on May 21, 2021 in an attempt to influence U.S. policy towards North Korea and jump-start dialogue between the two countries. Moon was only the second foreign leader to have travelled to meet with Biden, the first being Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga of Japan in April 2021. The South Korean leader’s Washington visit was the culmination of his efforts to have an impact on U.S. policy and comes at an auspicious time.

**The Biden Administration Announces a Calibrated Approach to North Korea**

Prior to Moon’s visit, the Biden administration announced that it had concluded its North Korean policy review and would be pursuing a “calibrated approach”, described as being somewhere

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between the Trump administration’s direct approach to Kim with the goal of concluding a “grand bargain”, and the Obama administration’s “strategic patience” approach which aimed to use sanctions and other pressure to force North Korea to negotiate denuclearization. The White House described its position as “a calibrated, practical approach that is open to and will explore diplomacy” with North Korea with the aim of making “practical progress that increases the security” of the U.S. and its allies.²

However, as seen by the collapse of the 2019 Hanoi summit, talks for talking’s sake will not suffice and may even be counter-productive.³ The U.S. needs to develop a realistic strategy with achievable goals. Here, Moon’s advice can be very helpful.

**Essential Elements of a Successful U.S. Policy on North Korea**

There are three essential elements for a successful policy.

First, there needs to be a high degree of attention at the presidential and secretary level. That is a major challenge for the Biden administration, which is dealing with so many domestic and foreign policy issues. The risk is that without this sustained high-level attention, North Korea policy will drift until the U.S. is confronted by some North Korean provocation.

Such high-level attention does not necessarily mean summits. In fact, Trump’s and Kim’s summit diplomacy – unsupported by either real diplomatic engagement or realistic policy – was mostly show with little substance and ended in the debacle at Hanoi. Biden will not want to replicate that, although at his press conference with Moon he did not rule out a meeting with Kim under the right circumstances.⁴

What it does mean is visible engagement by the president on North Korea policy and work by high-level envoys and diplomats who clearly speak for the president and can engage in substantive negotiations. In this regard, the meeting between Biden and Moon – in the midst of the American leader’s diplomatic efforts in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute – sent a positive signal of his interest in North Korea policy. It is a good first start but needs to be sustained. Also positive was Biden’s naming of an experienced diplomat well-versed in Korean issues – Ambassador Sung Kim – as special envoy to the region.

Second, U.S. policy must be realistic with achievable aims. Former U.S. Defense secretary William Perry once memorably said that “the United States must deal with North Korea as it is rather than as it would wish it to be.” Unfortunately, U.S. policy – with rare exceptions – has tended to take the opposite approach.⁵

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A realistic policy cannot be totally dependent on North Korea’s denuclearization. The overwhelming view of North Korea experts, including the U.S. intelligence community,\(^6\) is that North Korea will never denuclearize.\(^7\) The North Korean missile and nuclear program exists within a dense and sophisticated scientific and institutional eco-system; it is the centrepiece of scientific advance in North Korea and one of the few accomplishments of the regime which is not about to relinquish its crown jewel.\(^8\)

North Korea may be prepared to freeze development and testing of new weapons or even eliminate parts of its existing stockpile in return for the right terms, but it will never denuclearize. Any policy which requires complete denuclearization before any progress on every other front is a non-starter and will probably lead to enhanced North Korean nuclear and missile capacity.\(^9\)

However, explicit abandonment of complete denuclearization would be unacceptable to Congress as well as to South Korea, Japan and those concerned with nuclear proliferation. There are real concerns that any formal acceptance of North Korea’s nuclear status would prompt South Korea and Japan to pursue their own nuclear weapons programs; this would be very detrimental for regional security.\(^10\)

The needle to thread for the Biden administration is how to lessen the threat posed by North Korea’s arsenal (believed to have doubled to 40 to 60 nuclear warheads since 2017\(^11\)) while not acknowledging formally that North Korea is a nuclear state.

Ultimate denuclearization must be maintained as a façade in front of the reality of a nuclear North Korea. Denuclearization will have to remain as an aspirational goal while incremental progress is made on other fronts.

North Korea’s threat capacity is not limited to its nuclear capability. It has a massive army with conventional artillery located just north of the DMZ and aimed at Seoul, and it has expertise in both cyber and special forces, not to mention probable capacity in biological weapons.\(^12\)

In taking an incremental approach that could encompass this non-nuclear capability, the Biden administration could focus on a range of issues including peace and security, de-escalation, arms control, weapons reduction, conventional arms negotiations, cyber-security, peace agreement/declaration, humanitarian assistance, easing of sanctions and confidence-building measures.

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7 Views of a variety of American, South Korean and international experts at the 2020 Global Intelligence Summit, organized by the Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS), Seoul, Republic of Korea, and attended by author as a panellist, December 17, 2020. Also views of a variety of experts at 2\(^{nd}\) Harvard Korean Security Summit, organized by Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government and attended by author, February 8 to 10, 2021.
9 Yun and Aum.
10 Cha; Views of a variety of experts at 2\(^{nd}\) Harvard Korean Security Summit.
11 Discussions at 2020 Global Intelligence Summit.
12 Presentations at 2\(^{nd}\) Harvard Korean Security Summit.
South Korea and the U.S.’s other allies would support such an approach and it would likely gain the support of China, Russia and other states.

A particular challenge for the Biden administration will be how to address the issue of human rights in North Korea without derailing incremental progress in other areas. Based on my own discussions with North Korean interlocutors in the four diplomatic missions I led to the country in 2015 and 2016, North Korea may be less defensive to a thematic approach addressing rights such as those of the disabled, women and children and the right to education and health. However, the issue of political and civil rights and the appalling human rights record in North Korea needs to be addressed. The U.S. can expect strenuous pushback in this regard and attacks on its own human rights record, especially regarding its treatment of Indigenous people, African-Americans and other minorities.

Third, a successful strategy must set out clear benchmarks for the North Koreans to meet and make clear that the U.S. will reciprocate their positive and measurable actions with its own. Specifically, easing of sanctions in exchange for a nuclear and missile testing freeze and/or rollback in nuclear capacity should be on the table. The aim is incremental progress.

The identification of benchmarks and reciprocal actions should be the subject of negotiations between American and North Korean officials. U.S. officials will need to ensure that North Korea officials are empowered to negotiate and able and willing to convey the substance of the negotiations accurately to Kim. One of the principal causes of the Hanoi summit’s collapse was that both leaders came into the talks with unrealistic expectations due to being told what they wanted to hear rather than what they needed to hear about the negotiations between their respective officials.13

North Korea’s Mistrust Regarding American Intentions and Possible Provocations

The Biden administration’s declared aim of having a “calibrated, practical approach” is promising if actually implemented. The North Koreans will suspect that the idea of a change in U.S. policy will be more mirage than reality and that, at best, the Biden administration will seek to maintain the status quo on the Korean Peninsula while it turns its attention elsewhere. The status quo is not acceptable to North Korea, which will demand as a sine qua non the easing of sanctions.

While sanctions have had a definite negative impact on North Korea’s overall economy and a serious detrimental effect on the health and well-being of the already under-nourished North Korean population, they have had zero impact on the nuclear and missile program, which is the point of the sanctions in the first place and which has continued to expand.14

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13 Ibid. Also discussions at 2020 Global Intelligence Summit ...
14 Presentations of experts at 2nd Harvard Korean Security Summit …
Ironically, closures that North Korea itself imposed at the Chinese border out of fear at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic have caused far more economic dislocation than sanctions ever did.\textsuperscript{15}

North Korea’s pro forma criticism of Biden administration policy should not be taken at face value. North Korea will likely wait and see what concrete measures the U.S. puts forward and to what extent they are oriented to incremental steps as opposed to complete denuclearization. In the interim, it is possible that North Korea will test the waters of U.S. intentions by conducting short- or intermediate-range missile tests. Though less likely, it is still within the realm of possibility that North Korea may even decide to pursue a nuclear or long-range nuclear test, especially if there is a long delay in the presentation of U.S. proposals or if those proposals are found to be wanting. In any case, it is important that the U.S. not over-react to such provocations and allow itself to be distracted from its strategy.

The Key Determinant to the U.S. Strategy’s Success

The key determinant to success will be what the Biden administration emphasizes in its proposals – denuclearization or reciprocal measures by both sides. Biden said he appointed his special envoy for the region “to help refocus efforts on pressing Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons program”. On the other hand, Moon described the appointment as reflecting “the firm commitment of the U.S. for exploring diplomacy and its readiness for dialogue with North Korea.”\textsuperscript{16} As noted above, Biden administration officials have themselves spoken of a “calibrated, practical approach” rather than one aimed at achieving a grand bargain.\textsuperscript{17}

It is too early to say on which side of the above equation the Biden administration will land. Will it emphasize denuclearization or focus on diplomacy, dialogue and incremental measures?

If the Biden administration seeks to focus on denuclearization or merely maintain its North Korea policy as a holding action, it would do so at its own peril and that of the world.

The Role of Canada and the International Community

Moon knows what is at play and at risk; hence his encouragement to the U.S. to engage North Korea in dialogue. Canada and other concerned countries can assist by supporting Moon and joining him in urging the Biden administration to take a constructive and realistic approach to North Korea. The international community also needs to try to persuade North Korea to meet the U.S. and South Korea halfway and respond in kind to positive proposals.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Madhani, Superville and Miller.
\textsuperscript{17} White and Manson.
For Canada to play a useful role in this regard would require serious engagement on the North Korea file and more broadly, on regional security rather than the half-hearted efforts of recent years; the U.S. and South Korea would welcome such engagement. But to play a useful role, Canada needs to have sustained commitment by senior officials, adequate resources for the effort and its own channels to North Korea. This requires accreditation to North Korea of the Canadian ambassador in Seoul, a practice that Canada suspended in 2010, and the resumption of diplomatic visits to North Korea when travel there is possible; at the same time, the North Korean permanent representative to the UN in New York should be accredited to Canada. North Korea would welcome such dual accreditation and this would provide Canada with information, expertise and credibility on North Korean issues.

Canada, in consultation with like-minded countries, could also consider convening a conference of concerned states to urge substantive negotiations towards achievable goals. To be useful, such a conference must include countries such as Russia and, most importantly, China, which has such an important influence on North Korea.¹⁸

Conclusion

For decades, North Korea has cycled through periods of reconciliation followed by periods of provocation and weapons build-up, leaving it at the end of each cycle with a greater nuclear and missile capacity than the cycle before. Biden has an opportunity to break this cycle and shift the paradigm, but only if he moves from a focus on denuclearization to achievable goals gained through incremental progress. Moon will assist him in such an endeavour, but he needs North Korea to meet him halfway and undertake real negotiations with a view to taking reciprocal concrete action to lessen tension. The international community, including Canada, should urge the parties towards meaningful dialogue. Failure to achieve measurable progress would mean that at the end of the Biden presidency, North Korea’s nuclear capacity and the risk this poses will be greater than ever.

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He is a frequent media commentator on international affairs and is regularly invited to participate as a panellist and expert at foreign policy conferences in Canada, the United States, South Korea, Thailand and elsewhere.
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