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2021 KOREA STRATEGIC REVIEW

Is South Korea Going Global? New Possibilities Together With the Biden Administration

Chung Min Lee

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SUMMARY

Since South Korean President Moon Jae-in entered office in May 2017, he spent the first three years of his presidency focusing on summitry with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, convincing former U.S. president Donald Trump to engage directly with Kim, stressing his own version of “draining the swamp” or rooting out corruption, and promoting wage-led economic growth. However, less than a year before Moon leaves office, his domestic and inter-Korean policies remain mired in setbacks. Surprisingly, Moon's most enduring foreign policy legacy could lie in resetting and strengthening the U.S.-ROK (Republic of Korea) alliance after his critical meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden in May 2021.

The global outbreak of the coronavirus and the disease it causes, COVID-19, in early 2020 caught the world off guard. Yet South Korea's successful handling of the pandemic provided key political dividends to Moon including his party's resounding victory in the April 2020 National Assembly election. But just a year later, Moon's Democratic Party faced crushing defeats in mayoral by-elections in Seoul and Busan. With skyrocketing housing prices, continuing economic fallout from the pandemic, and stalled South-North relations, Moon hit the reset button in May 2021 by pivoting toward the United States and embracing Biden's foreign policy and economic recovery priorities.

While Biden has stressed the importance of denuclearization diplomacy with North Korea, he has also made clear that he will not meet with Kim Jong Un unless there is firm assurance of denuclearization prospects. During the U.S.-ROK

summit in Washington, DC, the joint statement stressed America's unflinching commitment to South Korean defense while recognizing the progress made through inter-Korean and U.S.-North Korea summits. More importantly, however, the joint statement emphasized, for the first time, the importance of maintaining an open and secure Indo-Pacific and security in the Taiwan Strait. Moon and Biden also joined hands in fighting climate change, building a more resilient high-tech supply chain, providing economic assistance to Central American states, and fighting cyber attacks. Leading South Korean companies including Samsung, LG, Hyundai, and SK agreed to invest some \$40 billion in manufacturing facilities in the United States.

What Biden and Moon did during their meeting was to put into place a new technology cooperation platform for the alliance on top of existing military, foreign policy, and economic partnerships. As the U.S.-China competition heats up, Biden wanted to secure critical support from key allies, including South Korea with its advanced manufacturing base. Moon understood that South Korea's leverage vis-à-vis North Korea but especially China could only be really strengthened through a new technology alliance. Despite Moon's overarching emphasis on engaging with Kim, the South Korean public has become more wary of Kim's intentions. In a May 2021 poll published by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, only 28.8 percent of respondents said that the U.S.-ROK alliance should focus on North Korea-related issues while 66.3 percent replied that shared universal values as joint democracies should garner greater attention.

When South Koreans choose their next president in March 2022, it will be up to Moon's successor to put into motion the initiatives that were agreed to in the May summit. As South Koreans become increasingly aware of China's overt pressures, they see the benefits of a more globalized South Korea anchored firmly in an expanding U.S.-ROK alliance. While unplanned from the onset, if a strengthened, modernized, and increasingly globalized alliance is realized over time, this will remain as Moon's most important foreign policy legacy notwithstanding his instincts to accommodate North Korea and an increasingly powerful China.

Even as he prepares to leave office, Moon can put into place initiatives that will begin to institutionalize U.S.–South Korea technology cooperation. Seoul and Washington should create a science and technology commission, launch a bilateral science and technology ministers' meeting, and focus sharply on emerging defense technology and space cooperation. South Korea and the United States should take the lead in energy transitions and fighting climate change. These steps will ensure that the alliance will emerge more relevant and stronger after the pandemic and reaffirm South Korea's growing role as an indispensable American ally with expanding global footprints.

INTRODUCTION

Although foreign policy issues including inter-Korean relations will not be at the epicenter of South Korea's upcoming presidential campaign, the country stands at a critical crossroads. Not only is North Korea accelerating development of its nuclear weapons arsenal, but it is also at a stage where it would be virtually impossible to roll back North Korea's nuclear capabilities. Diplomacy remains as the only viable option, but as noted below, prospects remain limited. For South Korea, the other major foreign policy and economic issue is the growing competition between the United States and China. South Korea also faces extremely daunting demographic challenges. Among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development member countries, South Korea has the lowest fertility rate and the fastest growing elderly population.¹ How South Korea manages its population decline, much lower GDP growth, and multi-pronged economic and technological competition from China will determine its global competitiveness well into mid-century.

Unique among U.S. allies, South Korea is the only country that has maintained historical ties with China for more than a thousand years. Since the Korean War, South Korea's alliance with the United States has become a cornerstone of South Korea's national security posture. And as evinced by South Korea's growing global footprint and an increasingly comprehensive alliance with the United States, the Republic of Korea (ROK) can provide key dividends to the United States. How Seoul traverses what many have called a new cold war between the United States and China—while coping with an accelerating North

Korean nuclear threat and maintaining its economic and technological competitiveness as the Fourth Industrial Revolution begins in earnest—will not be decided in the March 2022 presidential election. Nevertheless, the next South Korean president and the extent to which Moon Jae-in can begin to institutionalize what seems to be a major foreign policy course correction is going to significantly influence the shape of South Korea's globalization grid.

The Tail End of South Korean Presidencies

As South Korea heads into a year-long presidential campaign after a year and a half of grappling with a global pandemic, foreign policy and national security issues seem to be on the sidelines. Political stakes for both President Moon Jae-in and his Democratic Party (DP), however, have never been higher since the ruling party lost critical by-elections in the nation's capital, Seoul, and its second-largest city, Busan, on April 8, 2021. Former Seoul mayor Oh Se-hoon of the opposition People Power Party (PPP) returned to the role with a resounding 57.5 percent of the vote against the ruling party's Park Young-sun, who received 38.18 percent of the votes. In Busan, PPP candidate Park Hyung-joon trounced the DP's Kim Young-choon with 62.27 percent.

The race to succeed Moon will take up most of South Korea's political oxygen throughout 2021 and into early 2022. Moon will try to forestall a lame duck

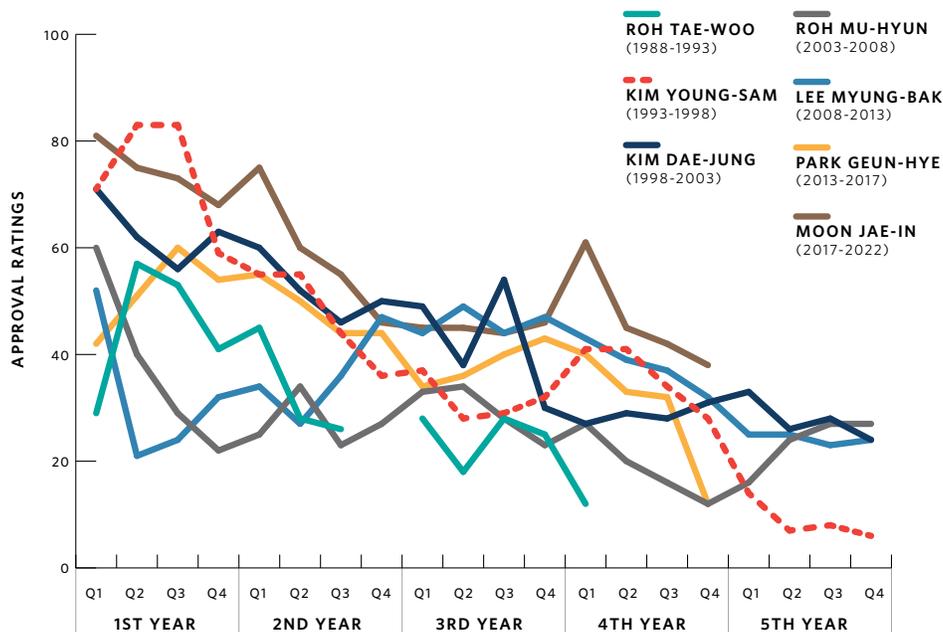
presidency by focusing on foreign policy issues and touting his achievements in South-North relations—areas where he can appear more successful. But as soon as the ruling party chooses its presidential candidate, power will inexorably shift to the next standard bearer. Moon’s approval ratings have continued to slip in his fourth year in office—a trend that has afflicted every South Korean president since the restoration of democracy in 1987 (see figure 1). Despite his slip in popularity, however, Moon remains more popular than any of his predecessors were at this point in their term.

Because South Korean presidents serve a single five-year term, they push through most of their major initiatives in the first two years. The concentration of power in the presidency is very high, but by the third or fourth year, approval ratings typically drop sharply. And without exception, every president since Roh Tae-woo, who was elected in 1987, left office with very low ratings. While each incoming president believes that he or she will be able to buck this

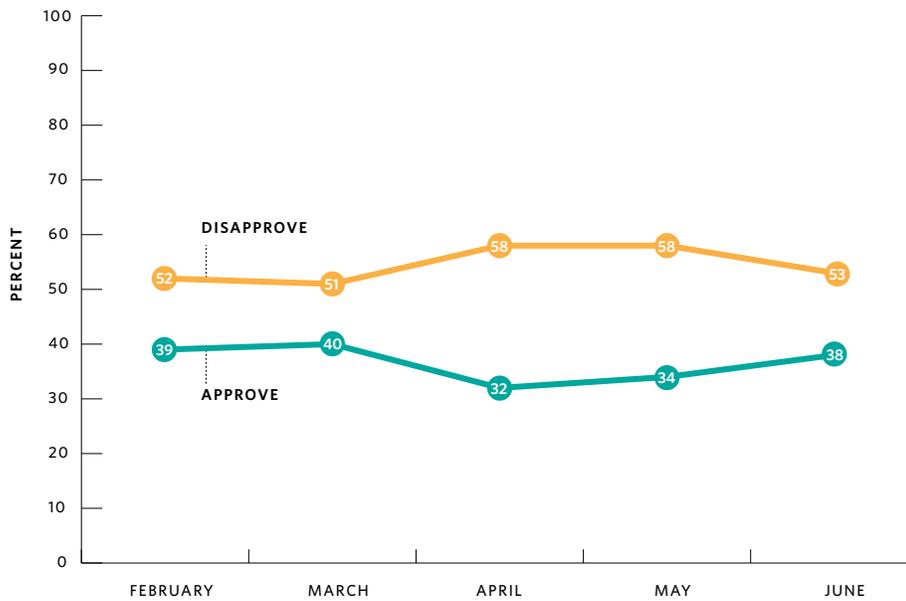
trend, Moon is also unlikely to be an exception. In a Gallup Korea poll conducted from February to early June 2021, Moon’s approval ratings stayed relatively unchanged from 39 percent to 38 percent as did his disapproval ratings from 52 percent to 53 percent (see figure 2). Moon’s disapproval ratings reached their highest levels of 58 percent in April and May 2021.

In the same opinion poll, respondents indicated that their reasons for disapproval were largely related to domestic issues. For example, in a June 2021 Gallup Korea poll, 26 percent of those who disapproved of Moon cited his handling of the current real estate crisis in South Korea²—an issue that has plagued his administration, but the crisis has been spurred by the government’s zig-zagging real estate policies. Apartment prices in Seoul have increased by 58 percent during Moon’s term, and none of the administration’s efforts to mitigate soaring housing costs have succeeded.³ Another 11 percent of respondents said they were unsatisfied with his handling of economic and socioeconomic issues more broadly.

Figure 1: Historical Approval Ratings of Korean Presidents



Source: “Daily Opinion no. 449,” Gallup Korea, May 27, 2021, <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1213>.

Figure 2: President Moon Jae-in's Approval Rating, February–June 2021

Source: “Daily Opinion, no. 452,” Gallup Korea, June 16, 2021, <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1220>.

Over the course of the pandemic, South Korea became a role model for its relatively successful management of COVID-19 due to rapid testing, expanded contact tracing, and systematic lockdowns. However, the government was criticized sharply for not procuring vaccines as soon as they became available compared to other developed economies. The Moon government has tried to maximize political windfalls from South Korea’s response to the pandemic. But many argue that it was the country’s universal healthcare system, public compliance, and critical reforms that were taken after previous epidemics such as SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome, 2002) and MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome, 2015) that enabled South Korea’s rapid response to COVID-19. In the Gallup Korea poll, of the 38 percent of respondents who approved of Moon’s job performance, 31 percent said that it was because of his handling of the pandemic.⁴

After the summit between Moon and U.S. President Joe Biden, the largest share of Moon’s supporters—33 percent—cited his handling of foreign policy as the

reason for their approval. In a poll conducted from May 11 to May 13 before the summit, just 3 percent of supporters named foreign policy as their reason for approval.⁵ However, support based on foreign policy wins is likely to be temporary, and the ruling party will need to persuade voters that it continues to deserve their support in the 2022 presidential election despite rising public discontent on Moon’s economic policies. According to a June 2021 Gallup Korea survey, for the first time since the impeachment of former president Park Geun-hye in 2017, the opposition conservatives’ approval rating reached 30 percent.⁶ Whether the PPP can continue to gain support, however, will depend on numerous factors such as retaining unprecedented support from those in their twenties and thirties, selecting a formidable presidential candidate, offering credible policy options, and rebranding itself as a more dynamic party.

For the first time in South Korean political history, a thirty-six-year-old was chosen by PPP members as their leader. Lee Jun-sok, a Harvard-educated

entrepreneur who has never been elected to the National Assembly, rose to the top as voters and party members clamored for a major generational shift. Right after Lee was chosen as head of the PPP in early June 2021, the party's approval rating jumped to 40.1 percent versus the DP's 28.6 percent, according to a Realmeter survey—although it will be much more difficult for the PPP to sustain such support.⁷

Moon's Realignment With Washington

Although domestic issues will dominate the 2022 presidential election, South Koreans are increasingly aware of the growing pressures the ROK faces from China to distance South Korea from the United States while maximizing bilateral economic interests. They also understand why the United States wants South Korea to move closer to the United States as its rivalry and competition with China intensifies. For example, the Moon-Biden summit came as a welcome surprise to South Korea's conservatives. When Moon agreed with Biden on maintaining a free and stable Indo-Pacific and the importance of stability in the Taiwan Strait through their joint statement, Moon seemed to be on the same strategic page as Biden.

The two allies also agreed to build more resilient critical technologies supply chains. South Korea's leading companies, such as Samsung, LG, SK, and Hyundai, announced that they were going to invest over \$40 billion in new factories and projects in the United States.⁸

North Korea's nuclear threat and denuclearization diplomacy were discussed in the May 2021 summit, but the meeting was not dominated by engagement toward North Korea—the central tenet of Moon's foreign and national security policy over the past four years. Since he became president in May 2017, Moon was perceived as tilting toward China despite his public remarks supporting the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Moon entered office when South Korean–Chinese ties were engulfed in a mini-crisis triggered by North Korea's nuclear test in January 2016 and then president Park Geun-hye's decision to deploy the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea to protect U.S. forces. From the onset, China argued that the U.S. anti-missile system denigrated its deterrence posture since THAAD missiles could target Chinese missiles. The United States maintained that the THAAD batteries deployed in South Korea were focused on defending U.S. forces from North Korean missiles.

After protracted tensions, Seoul ultimately agreed to the so-called three noes that de-escalated tensions with China—no additional deployment of THAAD batteries, no ROK participation in a U.S.-led regional missile defense system, and no creation of a trilateral military alliance involving the United States, South Korea, and Japan.⁹ While this diplomatic accord may have de-escalated tensions with China over THAAD, it also contained the seeds for future Chinese interventions each time South Korea undertakes major military initiatives on its own or in partnership with the United States. Indeed, ensuing South Korean presidents cannot let China dictate South Korea's critical defense choices, including the types of weapons systems it deploys or the depth of military ties with the United States.

The fact that a progressive president who was perceived as being pro-China agreed with Biden on Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific startled party stalwarts in both the DP and the PPP. The question remained, however, whether the summit signaled a marked shift in Moon's foreign policy priorities a year before he leaves office or if he simply wanted to buy goodwill from Biden to jump-start U.S.–North Korea talks.

Moreover, while public sentiment against China continues to increase in South Korea, this does not mean that the Moon government is about to fundamentally reappraise its China policy. Despite

the success of the summit, many questions remained unanswered, such as restarting U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises. Moon continued to pin hopes on restarting frozen inter-Korean and U.S.-North Korea talks. While prospects look highly unlikely, Moon is not going to completely discard the possibility of another South-North summit since such an event would help seal his legacy on inter-Korean détente and boost the standing of the ruling party's presidential candidate. But playing political football with a South-North summit at the end of Moon's term also entails significant risks, and it remains doubtful that Kim will provide Moon with a major gift as he leaves office.

NORTH KOREAN POLICY UNDER MOON, TRUMP, AND BIDEN

In the first two and a half years of former U.S. president Donald Trump's administration, Moon was at the forefront of convincing Trump to engage with Kim. This was because throughout 2018 and into 2019, Moon wanted to encourage a potential breakthrough between the United States and North Korea despite Trump's denigration of the U.S.-ROK alliance and opposition to U.S.-ROK joint military exercises. By the end of 2018, Moon was convinced that a transformative era in South-North relations was possible in parallel with a fundamental, breakthrough thaw in U.S.-North Korea ties. Even as Trump continued to demand that South Korea pay \$5 billion annually for common defense costs for maintaining the United States Forces Korea's 28,000 troops, Moon chose not to anger Trump. Given Trump's fixation with renegotiating trade deals, Moon also supported adjusting the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA)—an achievement that Trump touted

as a primary example of his America First foreign policy and his ingrained deal-making capabilities.¹⁰

Misreading Kim Jong Un's Strategic Intentions

But Moon and Trump pursued their respective engagement with Kim on the basis of fundamentally different calculations, and they both ended up badly misreading Kim's strategic intentions. For many observers, it was apparent from the onset that Kim had no intention of giving up his nuclear weapons. After his father, Kim Jong Il, tested North Korea's first nuclear weapon in 2006 and especially after he died in December 2011, Kim Jong Un saw the acceleration of North Korea's nuclear weapons program as an irreversible homage to his father and as Pyongyang's leverage against all of its neighbors, including China.

Like previous progressive South Korean leaders, Moon has been preoccupied with North Korea's promises to denuclearize in the belief that if the United States provides firm security guarantees and key incentives such as sanctions relief, North Korea will reach a viable nuclear accord. Indeed, former president Kim Dae-jung believed that North Korea would never develop a nuclear weapon. After North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in 2016 during the administration of Roh Moo-hyun (who was Kim Dae-jung's successor and another progressive leader), Kim Dae-jung only emphasized the importance of strengthening engagement with North Korea to jump-start denuclearization talks.

In January 1992, the two Koreas signed the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula that noted, in part, that "South and North Korea shall not test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons" and that neither side "shall . . . possess nuclear processing and uranium enrichment facilities."¹¹ Events since then have demonstrated that North Korea signed the agreement

without any intention of abiding by its provisions and aiming to expedite the removal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea—a step taken by George H. W. Bush’s administration in 1991 as part of its overarching nuclear posture review following the end of the Cold War.

From the onset, North Korea maintained that genuine denuclearization can only happen after the United States stops its nuclear umbrella over South Korea. For example, a long report issued by North Korea’s Korean Central News Agency in May 2003 stressed that “the joint declaration, in essence, proceeded from the goal of fundamentally removing the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula. The nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula is, thoroughly, a product of the US policy of turning South Korea into a nuclear base.”¹² North Korea has always asserted that it will not roll back its nuclear weapons program until such time that the United States also denuclearizes.

North Korea’s Strategy

Despite North Korea’s fractured economy compounded by international sanctions and the impact of its self-imposed isolation during the pandemic, Kim has strengthened his grip domestically. He has also dealt with three South Korean presidents and will face his fourth South Korean counterpart in May 2022. Kim’s biggest diplomatic victories occurred during the Trump administration when he met with Trump for the first U.S.–North Korea summit in Singapore in June 2018. The second summit with Trump in Hanoi in February 2019 collapsed when Kim refused to provide tangible assurances on denuclearization.

In June 2019, Trump convinced Kim to meet him in the truce city of Panmunjom on the thirty-eighth parallel and became the first U.S. president to step into North Korea’s territory when he symbolically crossed over the demarcation line. Per his reality television approach to summitry, Trump remarked that “I would

invite him right now, to the White House” but fumed at the media for not giving him due credit for easing tensions between Koreans and Japanese and said that it was “insulting” to suggest that little progress was made in concrete terms.¹³ Although Trump ended up providing Kim with legitimacy as a leader befitting three meetings with a sitting U.S. president, there was no substantive progress in U.S.–North Korea ties or tangible movement on denuclearization negotiations.

As prospects for normalizing U.S.–North Korea relations continued to dim in spite of Trump’s media shows with Kim, North Korea sealed its borders in January 2020 as the coronavirus began to spread from China. Kim chose to further isolate North Korea because of the massive political risks associated with an uncontrolled pandemic across North Korea.

Even as the pandemic became a global crisis in March 2020, North Korea fired short-range missiles on March 2, and castigated South Korea for criticizing North Korea’s missile tests. Kim Yo Jong, Kim Jong Un’s younger sister and a powerful senior figure in the North Korean leadership as deputy director of the propaganda and agitation department of the Korean Worker’s Party (KWP), lashed out at South Korea’s presidential office, reportedly saying,

Such incoherent assertion and actions made by Chongwadae [South Korea’s presidential office] only magnify our distrust, hatred and scorn for the south side as a whole. It is us who have to express “strong regret” at such incoherent and imbecile way of thinking of Chongwadae as it is guided by the logic that only they can conduct military exercises and others cannot.¹⁴

In June 2020, North Korea took the symbolic step of blowing up the South-North Liaison Office in Kaesong, North Korea, which was built with South Korean funds, to show its displeasure at the Moon government. Kim Yo Jong issued a statement that

same month castigating North Korean defectors and South Korean human rights activists who distributed anti-North Korean leaflets through balloons. “What matters is that those human scum hardly worth their value as human beings had the temerity of faulting our supreme leadership and citing ‘nuclear issue,’” said Kim Yo Jong.¹⁵

Notwithstanding Moon’s enormous efforts to trigger breakthroughs in inter-Korean ties and U.S.–North Korea relations, Kim Jong Un exploited Moon’s willingness to act as a conduit to Trump but had no intentions of truly de-escalating tensions with South Korea. Throughout the Trump years, North Korea grew even closer with China despite Trump’s assertions that he had a special relationship with Kim. On May 27, 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met North Korea’s new ambassador to China, Ri Ryong Nam, in Beijing to reaffirm China’s “traditional friendship” with North Korea.¹⁶ Wang’s meeting occurred after Moon’s meeting with Biden when the U.S. and South Korea agreed to scrap the bilateral missile accord that constrained South Korea’s ability to develop longer-range ballistic missiles. China’s foreign ministry noted that “China has always viewed its relationship with the DPRK [Democratic People’s Republic of Korea] from a strategic perspective and deepened friendship and cooperation from a long-term perspective.”¹⁷

Although China has supported United Nations (UN) sanctions on North Korea, it has also largely ignored sanctions violations by North Korean officials and companies. Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, North Korea has become even more dependent on Chinese economic largesse and political cover. And despite China’s consistent support calling for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, North Korea’s growing nuclear arsenal provides China with strategic leverage against South Korea, Japan, and the United States. While Moon has tried to upgrade relations with China, Beijing has responded by drawing North Korea closer to its orbit.

Trump’s North Korea Folly

Trump made history by holding the first summit with a North Korean leader in June 2018 in Singapore, but it was built around his image as a great negotiator with only limited substantive progress. The made-for-television Trump–Kim Jong Un summit highlighted Trump’s undying penchant for the limelight that overrode virtually every other aspect of presidential summitry. Despite his bombastic tweet after he returned from Singapore that “there is no longer a nuclear threat” from North Korea,¹⁸ the reality is that North Korea’s nuclear arsenal continued to expand under his watch.

After Trump’s first meeting with Kim Jong Un, Trump famously stated that “we will be stopping the war games . . . we’ll be saving a tremendous amount of money, plus, I think it’s very provocative.”¹⁹ According to Trump’s third national security adviser John Bolton, Trump was convinced that the costly exercises were being overpaid by the United States. Trump didn’t want to hear about why exercises were necessary since they “offended Kim Jong Un and were unnecessarily expensive. Case closed.”²⁰ According to the *New York Times*, official North Korean media reported at that time that Trump “promised to eventually lift sanctions against the North and cease military exercises with South Korea.”²¹

Trump’s euphoric assessment of his summit with Kim Jong Un underlined his bombastic approach to foreign relations and his cavalier attacks on U.S.–ROK military exercises. But Moon also did not want to emphasize U.S.–ROK military exercises because he wanted to sustain what appeared to be unprecedented movement in South–North relations in 2018, including three inter-Korean summits and Moon’s first visit to Pyongyang in September 2018. In the end, three factors—Trump’s denigration of decades of finely honed U.S.–ROK combined operations, including key military exercises; his so-called bromance with Kim Jong Un; and Moon’s penchant

to downplay threats from North Korea in the hopes of accelerating inter-Korean détente—all had the net effect of weakening the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Resetting North Korea Policy Under Biden

While it is too early to forecast the trajectory of the Biden administration's North Korea policy, Biden is highly unlikely to repeat the ill-conceived U.S.–North Korea summities that Trump cherished. Biden has stated his willingness to meet with Kim Jong Un if Kim made a commitment to denuclearize with a viable road map. While Moon remains cautiously optimistic that Biden is going to rekindle talks with North Korea and support Seoul's engagement with Pyongyang, the Biden administration is unlikely to place North Korea at the top of its foreign policy agenda. Moon was driven to engage Kim to satisfy his own long-held political beliefs, such as formally ending the Korean War and locking in so-called irreversible peace. Trump had virtually no understanding of Korean history or the importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance. For him, making the deal of the century with Kim was the perfect script for his reality television presidency.

But Biden's foreign policy experiences and instincts are fundamentally different given his preference for institutionalized channels and pragmatic American exceptionalism. And Biden is in no hurry to meet with Kim Jong Un. Since his inauguration in January 2021, Biden has stressed that he does not want to repeat Trump's approach to North Korea. When asked about the possibility of another early U.S.–North Korea summit, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki replied in March 2021 that “I think his approach would be quite different and that is not his intention.”²²

However, as explained in greater detail in a following section, the Moon-Biden summit was eventful because it emphasized a range of issues other than

nuclear diplomacy with North Korea. For Moon, the fact that Biden mentioned the importance of the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration, the Singapore Declaration, achieving complete denuclearization, and establishment of a permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula underscored his emphasis on South-North dialogue and engagement with Kim Jong Un.

Prior to his departure for Washington, Moon gave an interview to the *New York Times* on April 21 stating, “I hope that Biden will go down as a historic president that has achieved substantive and irreversible progress for the complete denuclearization and peace settlement on the Korean Peninsula.”²³ He also urged Biden to cooperate with China on global issues such as climate change since any major downturn in U.S.-China relations could have repercussions for denuclearization.²⁴

While Trump was in office, Moon never stopped praising him. Right after Moon's first meeting with Kim in April 2018, Moon even remarked during a cabinet meeting that Trump deserved to win the Nobel Peace Prize for agreeing to hold a summit with Kim.²⁵ Yet in the April 2021 interview, Moon displayed his true feelings about Trump's dealings with Kim and noted that Trump “beat around the bush and failed to pull it [negotiations with Kim] through.”²⁶ Not one to remain silent, two days later Trump shot back that Moon was “weak as a leader and as a negotiator, except when it came to the continued, long term military rip-off of the USA.”²⁷ Trump also reiterated his fondness for Kim and stated that the North Korean leader “never respected the current President of South Korea, Moon Jae-in.”²⁸

At the end of April 2021, the Biden administration completed its North Korea policy review. Although details remain sparse (even after the U.S.-ROK summit), Psaki stated that Biden would seek a third pathway between Trump's “grand bargain” and former president Barack Obama's “strategic patience.” She said, “Our goal remains the complete de-nuclearization

of the Korean Peninsula with a clear understanding that the efforts of the past four administrations have not achieved this objective.”²⁹ The State Department spokesperson, Jalina Porter, also reiterated the “ultimate goal” of the Biden administration which is the “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”³⁰

Washington's Calibrated, Practical Approach

Biden administration officials have emphasized a “calibrated, practical approach” that seeks not to repeat the mistakes or limitations of previous presidents, including Obama and Trump. Soon after the Biden administration announced the completion of its North Korea policy, Pyongyang responded by denouncing Washington’s hostile intentions. A North Korean foreign ministry official said that Biden’s speech to the U.S. Congress—where he referred to Iran’s and North Korea’s nuclear weapons as a serious threat to the United States and its allies—was “illogical and an encroachment upon the DPRK’s right to self-defense.”³¹ Such rhetoric is part of Pyongyang’s playbook, as is testing Washington’s inclinations for restarting negotiations that have been stalled since the failed second U.S.–North Korea summit in Hanoi.

Like his predecessors, Biden has stressed the importance of China’s role in denuclearization diplomacy. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has repeated what high-level U.S. officials have said in various forms, namely, that “China has a real interest in helping to deal with this [North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs]. . . . So we look to Beijing to play a role in advancing what is in, I think, everyone’s interest.”³² According to U.S. media reports, the Biden administration also reached out to North Korea in February 2021 through various channels but was rebuffed by Pyongyang. *Business Insider* reported that a U.S. official said, “To reduce the risks of escalation, we reached out to the North

Korean government through several channels starting in mid-February, including in New York,” referring to the North Korean mission to the UN. However, the official reportedly added, “To date, we have not received any response from Pyongyang.”³³

The same official also reportedly noted that the then ongoing North Korea policy review included evaluating “all available options to address the increasing threat posed by North Korea to its neighbors and the broader international community.”³⁴ It would not be a surprise if engagement advocates, including those with extensive experiences in setting up track 2 dialogues (which include the participation of experts, officials, and former officials in their private capacities) with North Korea, were used as back channels in the initial outreach to North Korea. And while it is way too early to say with any accuracy how receptive North Korea will be to the Biden administration, unless Kim Jong Un is certain that he will get key sanctions relief, there will be limited incentive by North Korea to engage with the Biden administration. As one reporter puts it,

There appears to be little reason, even under best-case circumstances, for the DPRK to wish to embrace the U.S. in a good-faith engagement at this stage. Compared to China, which Pyongyang knows it can extract tangibles like fuel and food aid from with little change to its nuclear policies, getting anything from the U.S. will likely be a long and tortuous effort.³⁵

The key is whether the Biden administration will provide sanctions relief without tangible progress on denuclearization. Moreover, so long as the Biden administration stresses human rights as an important North Korea policy agenda, Pyongyang will have even less incentive to negotiate with the Biden administration. On April 28, just as the Biden administration was announcing the completion of its North Korea policy review, the State Department

released a statement on the dire straits of North Korea's human rights. The statement noted, in part, that:

We stand with the millions of North Koreans who continue to have their dignity and human rights violated by one of the most repressive and totalitarian states in the world, including the more than 100,000 individuals who suffer unspeakable abuses in the regime's political prison camps. We are appalled by the increasingly draconian measures the regime has taken, including shoot-to-kill orders at the North Korea–China border, to tighten control of its people under the guise of fighting COVID-19. The civilized world has no place for such brutality, and the international community must continue to speak out.³⁶

This was an unusually direct statement, and it also indirectly criticized the Moon government's crackdown on North Korean defectors and human rights workers in South Korea who had distributed leaflets in North Korea. The statement continued, "We also honor the courage of the North Korean defector and human rights community and will always support their efforts to shine a spotlight on these grave injustices."³⁷

After those leaflets were spread despite a ban imposed by South Korea, Kim Yo Jong denounced the Moon government. Her May 1 statement noted that "whatever decision we make and whatever actions we take, the responsibility for the consequences thereof will entirely rest with the South Korean authorities."³⁸ In the May 21 joint statement issued by Biden and Moon, it was noted that "we agree to work together to improve the human rights situation in the DPRK and commit to continue facilitating the provision of humanitarian aid to the neediest North Koreans."³⁹

The Denuclearization Mirage

Initial attacks on the Biden administration by the North Korean leadership do not necessarily mean that North Korea is going to refuse to deal with the Biden administration. During his meeting with Moon, Biden announced the appointment of Ambassador Sung Kim as special envoy to North Korea—who currently serves as ambassador to Jakarta and with extensive experience in negotiating with Pyongyang. Sung Kim's appointment was widely reported in Seoul, and it was noted that he played a key role in facilitating Trump's meeting with Kim Jong Un in Singapore.⁴⁰

When asked during his press conference with Moon if he was willing to meet with Kim Jong Un, Biden replied that if there was a commitment to discuss denuclearization, he would do so but also stressed that "what I would not do is what has been done in the recent past. I would not give him all he's looking for, international recognition as legitimate, and give him what allowed him to move in a direction of appearing to be more serious about what he wasn't at all serious about."⁴¹

Like previous administrations, the main quandary lies in the meaning of the "complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." Biden does not harbor any illusions about North Korea, but he will continue to probe North Korea for direct talks. Since the outbreak of the North Korean nuclear crisis from the early 1990s but especially since it tested its first nuclear device in 2006, bilateral and multilateral denuclearization talks have failed to prevent North Korea from going nuclear or to roll back Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities. In the end, the Biden administration is unlikely to convince Kim to give up his nuclear arsenal, and the United States, together with other stakeholders, will continue to live with a nuclearized North Korea.

Pyongyang continues to insist that once the United States drops its so-called hostile policy toward North

Korea and provides a security guarantee, it will move down the road of denuclearization. North Korea's definition of a hostile policy, however, includes removing South Korea from a U.S. nuclear umbrella, withdrawing U.S. forces from South Korea, and lifting sanctions on North Korea. Even Trump was unwilling to take such steps. Previous U.S. administrations have asserted that the United States has no intentions of undertaking regime change in North Korea. But in the end, the Kim regime's ability to survive does not rest on any security guarantee offered by the United States or another external power. Rather, it lies exclusively on how long the North Korean people are willing to put up with the world's most draconian family-run dictatorship. So long as the Kim dynasty remains in power, Kim Jong Un will not give up his nuclear arsenal.

SOUTH KOREA IN AN ERA OF NEW GREAT POWER COMPETITION

As U.S.-China strategic rivalry and competition heats up and China shows no signs of slowing down its accelerated military modernization, Beijing will continue to insist on a docile South Korea that does not disrupt the South-North military balance and that erodes China's own power projection capabilities. China's biggest leverage stems from South Korea's high reliance on the Chinese market and the fact that China is North Korea's only ally and economic benefactor. In 2019, 24.5 percent of South Korea's exports went to China, followed by the United States with 13.5 percent and Vietnam with 8.6 percent. If exports to Hong Kong are factored in, the total volume of South Korean exports to China was 30.1 percent.⁴² South Korean companies understand the

need to reduce their dependence on the Chinese market but are reluctant to do so since they want to maximize economic dividends as China's domestic spending increases.

From a broader perspective, the Biden administration also wants South Korea to support wider U.S. interests, including in dealings with China. Biden is particularly keen on getting South Korea on board to ensure that the United States and its major allies remain dominant players in the global computer chip market. At a virtual White House CEO summit on semiconductor and supply chain resilience, Biden stressed his determination to ramp up America's prowess in chips and told the group that "our competitiveness depends on where you invest and how you invest. . . . We're ranked, like, number twenty-fifth in the world now. That's not American."⁴³

South Korea's New Balancing Act

It is too early to say whether the Moon-Biden summit presages South Korea's determination to play a greater strategic role through a broadened and strengthened U.S.-ROK alliance. But as China's economic and military shadows become increasingly prominent in and around the Korean Peninsula, the benefits from a stronger and expanded alliance with the United States are likely to become more tangible. Hence, South Korea's foreign policy and national security dilemma is beginning in earnest as it juggles a North Korea with accelerating nuclear weapons capabilities, a United States determined to roll back China's relentless rise, a China that is equally determined to check U.S. power and displace the United States as the preeminent military power in Asia, and a domestic national security consensus that remains deeply divided over contending approaches to inter-Korean relations.

Regardless of the outcome of the 2022 presidential election, whoever succeeds Moon will continue to grapple with pressures from the United States and

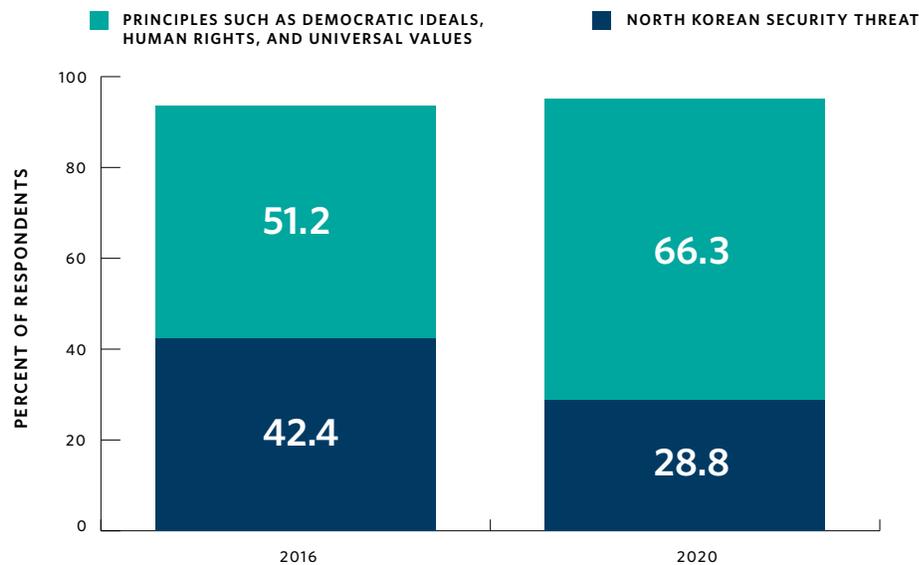
China. As evinced by the Moon-Biden summit, the alliance's scope is growing. It is also critical for South Korea to maintain close ties with China given Beijing's sheer magnitude of influence on peninsular security and throughout future transitions, including the modalities of a unified Korea. But importantly, there will be fundamental barriers to deepening South Korea–China ties given that South Korea is an established democracy and China continues to be ruled by the Communist Party. Moreover, even though South Korea has extensive ties with China, South Koreans are unwilling to decouple South Korea from the United States and the West. Indeed, one of the most remarkable transformations since the Korean War has been South Korea's increasingly deepening ties with the United States.

According to a May 2021 survey conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 66.3 percent of South Koreans believe that the U.S.-ROK alliance

should focus on principles such as democracy, human rights, and universal values while 28.8 percent thought that North Korea should be the focus (see figure 3).⁴⁴ In 2016, 42 percent of respondents said that responding to and managing North Korean threats should be at the center of the alliance's concern.⁴⁵ What is also surprising is that despite the prevalence of the North Korean issue throughout much of the Moon presidency, as well as the Moon administration's relentless emphasis on engaging with Kim Jong Un, the percentage of South Koreans who believed that democracy and universal values should receive more attention than North Korean issues in the alliance continued to increase.

This is perhaps emblematic of the realization that South Korea's fundamental strategic leverage vis-à-vis North Korea and China stems from its alliance with the United States—although as the erratic policies of the Trump administration illustrated,

Figure 3: Future Issues for the ROK-U.S. Alliance



Source: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, May 2021

alliance continuity is always a work in progress. Maximizing Seoul's strategic dividends from its alliance with Washington while minimizing frictions with Beijing is the defining sine qua non of South Korean foreign policy that cuts across party lines and prevailing ideologies.

Given the importance attached to beefing up U.S. and allied capabilities vis-à-vis China, however, the Biden administration also wants South Korean support for the Quad, or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue including the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. So far, Moon has only stressed the importance of maintaining the alliance and doubling down on the need to restart U.S.–North Korea talks. Moon spent much of his first two years on so-called mediation diplomacy between Kim Jong Un and Trump, although two summits did not produce a nuclear deal.⁴⁶ As mentioned above, however, the Biden-Moon joint statement affirmed the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific and noted that the alliance “is grounded in our shared values and anchors our respective approaches to the Indo-Pacific region.”⁴⁷ The two leaders also stressed that

The United States and the Republic of Korea oppose all activities that undermine, destabilize, or threaten the rules-based international order and commit to maintaining an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific. *We pledge 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.* President Biden and President Moon emphasize the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. As democracies that value pluralism and individual liberty, we share our intent to promote human rights and rule of law issues, both at home and abroad (emphasis added).⁴⁸

Without formally joining the Quad, Moon moved as far as he could in siding with the United States on a free and open Indo-Pacific including the South China Sea—arguably the most important strategic battleground between the United States and China. While many conservatives believe that South Korea should officially join the Quad (quite apart from the fact that South Korea has not been invited nor is likely to be), even if the PPP regains power in 2022, Seoul is likely to retain Moon's approach to the Indo-Pacific. The Moon administration has emphasized that the Quad should be “transparent, open, and inclusive” rather than a grouping that focuses on constraining China.⁴⁹ The *Global Times*, a sister paper of the *People's Daily* and a strident purveyor of the Chinese Communist Party's official views, carried an op-ed in March 2021 that noted “the Quad is a small anti-China group” and that if South Korea joined it, such a move would damage the “restored strategic trust between China and South Korea.”⁵⁰

Expanding South Korea's Global Footprint

There is no silver bullet in overcoming South Korea's growing dilemma between the United States and China since Seoul must get along with both Washington and Beijing. Compared to South Korea, Japan has been much more vocal in airing concerns about China, and Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi said in May 2021 that Japan plans to scrap its 1 percent defense budget ceiling.⁵¹ With China's growing military capabilities, the United States has nudged Japan to increase its defense spending, and Kishi noted that the military balance between Japan and China has “leaned heavily toward China in recent years, and the gap has been growing by the year.”⁵² In large part, South Korea's posture toward China is driven by the fact that even though it is a significant middle power, it has to focus most of its defense efforts on meeting the growing range of asymmetrical threats from North Korea.

The prevailing view outside of South Korea is that Seoul has overemphasized hedging between China and the United States at the expense of its alliance with Washington. But even Japan has been reluctant in decoupling economically from China even though Tokyo has been more forthcoming on the China threat. What is patently clear from surveys, however, is that the South Korean public increasingly sees China unfavorably. According to an April 2021 survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, a large majority of South Koreans believe that China aims to displace the United States as the dominant power in the world (60 percent) or as the preeminent power in Asia (28 percent).⁵³ A whopping 83 percent of respondents said that China is more of a security threat while only 12 percent sees China as a security partner.⁵⁴

The vast majority of South Koreans see the United States and China as rivals (88 percent) but 49 percent think that growing U.S.-China rivalry is a critical threat to South Korea.⁵⁵ Such views may be driven by the fact that most Koreans continue to believe that South Korea can navigate the choppy waters between the United States and China.

Moreover, South Koreans are much more aware of a wider range of key security threats, topped by South Korea's rapidly falling birth rate and climate change (see table 1). Chinese military and economic capabilities are seen as critical security threats by 52 percent of South Koreans. In short, South Koreans have a more nuanced view of its place in the world and the confluence of new and traditional threats the country faces. Official foreign policy does not always correlate with public opinion. But for a country that is heavily dependent on export earnings as its major economic driver while cognizant of the crucial value of its long-standing alliance with the United States, South Korea has little choice but to continue to balance its ties with the world's two most powerful states.

What is also very clear is that while it is impossible for South Korea to escape the grip of geopolitics and the convergence of great power interests on the Korean Peninsula, it can alleviate these pressures by emphasizing its increasingly relevant global capabilities. Enlarging its fair share of global responsibilities on key areas such as climate change and energy transitions—in addition to being

Table 1: How South Koreans See Critical Security Challenges

Critical Security Issues	Percentage of Respondents Who Say the Issue Is a Threat
Lower birth rates in South Korea	81%
Climate change	76%
North Korea's nuclear program	62%
COVID-19 pandemic	57%
Economic inequality	53%
China's military power	53%
China's economic power	51%
U.S.-China competition	49%

Note: The question asked respondents to say whether or not each item was a critical threat to South Korea's interests.

Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, May 2021 survey

at the forefront of economic and technological transformations driven by the Fourth Industrial Revolution—will provide South Korea with new foreign policy spaces. Since South Korea has no choice in coping with massive traditional security threats such as North Korea’s growing nuclear arsenal and China’s increasing military shadow, it makes eminent sense to foster stronger security ties with the United States. At the same time, by taking the lead on climate change and fostering universal values, South Korea can play a limited but unique role in the Asian power balance.

COURSE CORRECTION FOR AN INCREASINGLY GLOBAL ALLIANCE

Despite the convergence of interests between Moon and Trump insofar as negotiating with Kim Jong Un was concerned, the U.S.-ROK alliance was bogged down by bilateral tensions, growing U.S.-China discord, and North Korea’s ultimate refusal to make meaningful progress on denuclearization. Unlike Biden, Trump disdained alliances and thought that most U.S. allies were essentially defense free riders. There was little room for potential bilateral or even multilateral cooperation on key global issues. In the case of South Korea, Trump’s view of the alliance completely subverted some of its most foundational values. Since the signing of the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty in 1953, the U.S.-ROK alliance has been predicated on the promise that the United States will support and defend South Korea from armed attack. Trump’s approach to the alliance threw this core commitment into question as he continuously suggested U.S. troops should be withdrawn from the

peninsula, that South Korea should pay much more to host U.S. troops, or even that South Korea should develop its own nuclear weapons to defend itself.⁵⁶

The Moon administration had a delicate balance to strike during this period. On one hand, Moon had to successfully manage Trump to keep him engaged in top-down diplomacy with North Korea, as discussed earlier in this study. On the other, it had to carefully hedge against Trump’s erratic and harmful approaches to the alliance so that the U.S.-ROK alliance would survive Trump’s term.

As negotiations with North Korea stalled, however, the Moon administration refused to accept Trump’s demand to increase host nation support (which is officially managed through the Special Measures Agreement that is negotiated every five years) to up to \$5 billion per annum rather than the typical \$1 billion figure—a five-fold increase in South Korea’s financial contribution to the cost of stationing U.S. troops on the peninsula. This was an unheard of request in the history of the alliance.⁵⁷ South Korea continuously rejected this amount, and the Trump administration refused to lower its demands, leading the agreement to expire with no replacement in 2019.⁵⁸ No less than two months into Biden’s term, however, the two allies had reached an agreement in principle to a new cost-sharing agreement, which was subsequently signed at the summit between the two leaders on May 21, 2021.⁵⁹

The rapid resolution of such a high-profile and contentious issue that plagued the alliance throughout the Trump administration immediately indicated a new trajectory for the alliance. As Moon tweeted on the day of Biden’s inauguration, South Korea feels that “America is back.”⁶⁰ Thus far, opinion polls support such sentiments. In a December 2020 poll by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 74.7 percent of South Koreans said they believed the bilateral relationship would improve under Biden, compared

Figure 4: Prospects for Bilateral Relations



Source: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, December 2020

to 19.1 percent that said they believed bilateral relations would improve under Trump in 2016 (see figure 4).⁶¹

One of the key lessons of the Trump years is the significant politicization of the alliance depending on who sits in the Oval Office. While Trump didn't remove or reduce the size of the United States Forces Korea (USFK), many South Koreans felt that Washington could no longer be trusted to do the right thing on core defense issues given Trump's disdain for the alliance and constant attacks on South Korea (and other U.S. allies) for not contributing their fair share of common defense costs. There has always been those who have called for a more independent defense posture, including support for the reintroduction of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, or those on the far right who advocate for South Korea's own independent nuclear capabilities like Israel and India have. But the vast majority of South Koreans support its crucial military alliance with the United States as the optimal

security arrangement together with increasingly robust national defense capabilities.

Nevertheless, South Koreans today are much more aware of the volatility in U.S. politics and its impact on U.S. defense commitments, although earlier examples of volatility existed. When former president Jimmy Carter entered office in 1977, he initially promised to keep his campaign pledge to gradually withdraw U.S. ground troops from South Korea. Carter eventually reversed his decision. What made Trump totally different from Carter, however, was Trump's preference for scorched-earth approaches and an incessant obsession of seeing all alliances as different shades of transactional relationships. Hence, ensuring that the alliance can thrive into the 2020s and beyond, including a stronger technology partnership, should be at the forefront of the next South Korean president's engagement with the Biden administration.

Resetting the Alliance—Off to a Strong Start

Members of the Biden administration wasted no time in starting the restoration process and connecting with their South Korean counterparts—Moon was one of the earliest heads of state to talk with Biden after his election, and South Korea was an early stop for high-level U.S. officials, including Blinken, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, and U.S. Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry.⁶² Where Trump's disruptive approach to diplomacy purposefully caught allies off guard, officials in the Biden administration are clearly engaging closely with their South Korean counterparts from the top to the lower levels of government.⁶³ This was already evident in reports of how closely South Korea was consulted during the administration's months-long North Korea policy review—a far cry from the way Trump kicked off his relationship with Kim Jong Un that caught South Korea by surprise.⁶⁴

But the level of coordination was even more palpable in the U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement. First, the sheer number of topics the allies were aligned on was impressive—the statement covered a broad range of issues, from bilateral to global (see table 2). While some topics received only boilerplate rhetorical commitments, many (if not most) of the summit's deliverables included financial or organizational support to accomplish their stated goal—including in very unexpected areas, like a \$220 million contribution from South Korea to development cooperation in Central America's Northern Triangle countries to address the root causes of migration from the region.⁶⁵

Second, the statement indicated extensive coordination and alignment on sensitive topics that Moon's critics did not expect. Over the course of his presidency, Moon has opted not to take any explicit stances against China or that are perceived to be

Table 2: Issues addressed in the U.S.-ROK Joint Leaders' Statement

Bilateral	Regional	Global
Emphasized commitment to U.S. extended deterrence and strengthening alliance posture.	Emphasized support for ASEAN centrality and ASEAN-led regional architecture.	The U.S.-ROK alliance's global role in promoting nonproliferation and "safe, secure, and safeguarded uses of nuclear technology."
Signed a multiyear Special Measures Agreement for the defense cost-burden sharing of stationing U.S. troops in South Korea.	Pledged to expand regional coordination on "law enforcement, cybersecurity, public health and promoting a green recovery."	Commitment to full implementation of UN Security Council resolutions on North Korea.
Pledged to expand bilateral cooperation in cyber crime and law enforcement by establishing a cyber crime working group between law enforcement and homeland security agencies in both countries.	Expressed intent to promote greater connectivity and digital innovation within ASEAN.	Shared intent to promote human rights and rule of law at home and abroad.

Table 2: Issues addressed in the U.S.-ROK Joint Leaders' Statement Continued

Bilateral	Regional	Global
Terminated the U.S.-ROK Revised Missile Guidelines.	Emphasized efforts to promote sustainable development, energy security, and responsible water management in the Mekong sub-region.	Agreed to "cooperate to increase resiliency in our supply chains, including in priority sectors such as semiconductors, eco-friendly EV batteries, strategic and critical materials, and pharmaceuticals."
Affirmed the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration and Singapore Joint Statement on a U.S.-South Korea approach to North Korea policy.	Acknowledged the importance of "open, transparent, and inclusive regional multilateralism including the Quad."	Acknowledged and reaffirmed one another's cooperation to mitigate climate change through hosting global summits, financial commitments, and commitments to reducing or eliminating greenhouse gas emissions.
Announced \$25 billion of investment from leading companies in both countries to address semiconductor chip shortages.	Declared opposition to "all activities that undermine, destabilize, or threaten the rules-based international order and commit to maintaining an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific."	Committed to work together in international venues to end public financing for "unabated overseas coal-fired power plants."
Pledged to strengthen partnership in critical emerging technologies; the United States pledged \$2.5 billion and South Korea pledged \$1 billion to investments in research, development, testing, and deployment of secure 5G and next-generation mobile networks.	Pledged to maintain freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea.	Committed to "align official international financing with the global achievement of net zero greenhouse gas emissions no later than 2050"; committed to seek economy-wide decarbonization in both countries.
Explored the creation of a U.S.-ROK Supply Chain Task Force between the White House and Blue House.	Emphasized the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.	Pledged to cooperate on resolving the issue of marine debris and plastic pollution "at the global level"; acknowledged the importance of cooperation on this issue through the 2022 International Marine Debris Conference in Busan, South Korea.
Committed to establish a bilateral investment screening working group led by the U.S. Department of Treasury and its South Korean counterparts to collaborate on safeguarding investments and strengthening investment screening.	Condemned violence by the Myanmar military and pledged commitment to continue to press for the cessation of violence, release of those detained, and return to democratic rule.	Committed to cooperate in scaling up global vaccine production and distribution through COVAX and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations; South Korea committed to expand its COVAX funding.
South Korean announced signing of the Artemis Accords; both countries committed to expand cooperation in civil space exploration.	Resolved to take "decisive action" to improve pandemic response in the Indo-Pacific.	Agreed to work together to strengthen the WHO's ability to prevent pandemics, and support evaluation and analysis of the origins of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Table 2: Issues addressed in the U.S.-ROK Joint Leaders' Statement Continued

Bilateral	Regional	Global
<p>Pledged to elevate the existing Energy Policy dialogue to the ministerial level and expand cooperation to include "R&D on hydrogen storage, collaboration on electric vehicle battery manufacturing in the United States, lithium-ion battery recycling, grid-scale energy storage, and potential renewable energy deployment."</p>		<p>South Korea pledged \$200 million to the Global Health Security Agenda; pledged to ROK engagement in the Global Health Security Agenda Steering Group and Action Package Working Groups.</p>
<p>Agreed to increase the two-way exchange of young environmental leaders.</p>		<p>To join efforts in reforming the World Trade Organization and oppose unfair trade practices.</p>
<p>Pledged to work together to renew bilateral health memorandum of understanding between the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare.</p>		<p>Pledged to expand development cooperation and partnership through the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Korea International Cooperation Agency.</p>
<p>Agreed to establish a ROK-U.S. Global Vaccine Partnership to "strengthen joint response capabilities for infectious disease through international vaccine cooperation" and launch a senior-level KORUS Global Vaccine Partnership Experts Group to implement the partnership.</p>		<p>Commitment to providing \$220 million for 2021-2024 to development cooperation in the Northern Triangle countries.</p>
<p>South Korea committed to adopt "common policy with the United States to require recipient countries have an IAEA safeguard agreement Additional Protocol in place as a condition of supply of nuclear power plants."</p>		<p>Emphasized the importance of women's roles in strengthening human rights and democracy; committed to exchange best practices on closing the gender wage gap.</p>
<p>Pledged to create a public-private "Domestic Violence and Cyber-Exploitation Working Group dedicated to ending the abuse of women online and offline" in both countries.</p>		<p>Announced the U.S.-ROK Democracy and Governance Consultations (DCG) to serve as a mechanism for coordination on human rights and democracy promotion.</p>

Sources: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/21/05/2021/fact-sheet-united-states-republic-of-korea-partnership/>; <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/21/05/2021/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/>.

against China. This choice has, at times, diluted or even prevented South Korea's cooperation with the United States and other partners in the region. Given this background, pre-summit reporting pointed to potentially contentious negotiations over any language concerning China.⁶⁶

As noted above, while the statement did not call out China by name, it did “emphasize the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait” and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea—the most emblematic hot spots in the U.S.-China geopolitical rivalry.⁶⁷ Although it stopped short of any reference to Xinjiang or Hong Kong, including these two sensitive issues—Taiwan and the South China Sea—in the statement showed Moon's willingness to demonstrate support for the U.S. geopolitical outlook, even as China predictably objected to the inclusion of the references in the joint statement.⁶⁸ Moreover, the statement announced a \$25 billion commitment by companies from both countries to increase supply chain resilience in a direct move to reduce reliance on China for the production of goods involving advanced technologies.⁶⁹ In both rhetoric and action, South Korea appears to be engaging in more close cooperation with the United States on China.

Third, the summit's deliverables demonstrated the United States' willingness to take proactive steps to reassure and embolden South Korea. In addition to resolving lingering issues from the Trump years, the summit included a major deliverable for South Korea in the full termination of the U.S.-ROK bilateral missile guidelines.⁷⁰ Since the 1970s, these guidelines have limited ranges and payloads of South Korean indigenous ballistic missiles. The limits have changed many times over the years—including twice under the Trump administration—but the announcement that they would be fully terminated was a surprise outcome of the summit.⁷¹

Terminating the guidelines has long been popular with both the left and right in South Korea—the left because of the importance it places on autonomy in national defense, and the right because of the importance it places on developing strong capabilities to deter the North Korean threat. Though the ultimate deliverable relating to greater defense autonomy—such as the transfer of wartime operational control of South Korea's military from the United States back to South Korea—is still in process, terminating the missile guidelines demonstrated Washington's trust in Seoul's ability to play a more active defense role.

Upgrading the Relationship

Although the summit was successful, the United States and South Korea have challenging adjustments to reset their alliance for an increasingly complex and dangerous security environment. While the alliance has expanded greatly in recent decades, particularly since South Korean president Lee Myung-bak's administration, the strategic focus of the alliance remains on North Korea.⁷² The alliance today, however, exists in a far more interconnected world. Previous great power competition between the United States and the Soviet Union operated largely through strategic spheres of influence.

Importantly, the Soviet Union never posed an economic threat or challenge to the United States. The U.S.-China rivalry, however, is fundamentally different from the earlier Cold War conflict given China's standing as the world's second-largest economy. Most U.S. treaty allies trade more with China than the United States, including South Korea. And this provides unique leverage to Beijing, as illustrated by China's pressure on South Korea over the THAAD controversy. Ensuring that South Korea and other key U.S. allies can be shielded from China's economic brinkmanship has emerged as an important alliance management agenda. From

such a perspective, the fact that South Korea is an increasingly competitive global player in technology, advanced manufacturing, energy, and health security augurs well for an expanding U.S.-ROK partnership despite the central importance of deterring multiple threats from North Korea.

As a case in point, out of a total of 2,600 words in the joint statement, North Korea just took up 240 words. Instead, the bulk of the statement focused on “the significance of the U.S.-ROK relationship [that] extends far beyond the Korean Peninsula,” including technology and innovation, global health, climate and energy, regional issues in the Indo-Pacific, cyber crime, space, and a host of other issues.⁷³ South Korea’s technological innovation, commitment to climate leadership in multilateral forums, strong democratic values, and largely successful pandemic response make it a natural partner for many of the United States’ emerging priorities. Ironically, in a summit that eschewed a cost-focused approach to alliance management, South Korea committed to a sizable amount of funding for joint initiatives—a 13.9 percent increase on its contribution toward the stationing of U.S. troops on the peninsula equaling over \$123 million, \$25 billion in investments from South Korean and U.S. companies, and at least \$1.4 billion for other initiatives.⁷⁴

Such a shift corresponds with South Korea’s increasing global footprint. South Korea gained critical international credibility for its successful handling of the coronavirus pandemic, and Seoul hopes it can translate such branding to enhanced influence on key transnational issues including global health and climate change.⁷⁵ Although it remains to be seen how Moon’s Green New Deal and Digital New Deal will result in tangible benefits, South Korea has to focus on green growth, renewable energy transitions, and innovations spurred by the Fourth Industrial Revolution regardless of domestic political developments—including the critical March 2022 presidential election.⁷⁶

Anchoring the Alliance for a New Era

Putting into practice the many initiatives and pledges contained in the May 2021 U.S.-ROK Leaders’ Joint Statement, like previous ones, is always a work in progress. It requires immense follow-up, political capital, and constant tweaking by senior officials. But commensurate with South Korea’s remarkable progress over the past four decades, including its rise as a formidable economic power, a trading giant, and a nimble global actor, the joint statement genuinely reflected the speed and depth of the alliance’s transformation. The Mutual Defense Treaty remains at the core of the alliance, but the ROK is no longer an impoverished country critically dependent on the United States for its security and defense.

It would have been unthinkable in the 1950s, the 1960s, and even the 1970s to imagine South Korea as an advanced economy, a robust democracy, and an important contributor to the global commons. Biden and Moon stressed in their joint statement that the importance of the alliance extends far beyond the Korean Peninsula since “it is grounded in our shared values and anchors our respective approaches to the Indo-Pacific region.”⁷⁷ The litmus test lies in whether the alliance can undertake out-of-area missions.

The alliance’s core institutions and priorities are predicated on the Mutual Defense Treaty and the central role of the USFK. As such, renewed emphasis on regional and global priorities in the alliance raises questions about USFK and its potential roles in contingencies beyond the Korean Peninsula. This is particularly important for the Combined Forces Command (CFC), the binational military command led by the United States under which South Korean forces would operate in the event of an armed attack on the Korean Peninsula.

If the roles and missions of USFK are modified owing to shifting U.S. strategic priorities, such as rotating elements of the USFK for out-of-area missions such

as near the South China Sea, it would have significant repercussions throughout the CFC. In the past, USFK and U.S. policy have maintained that the role of USFK and CFC does not extend to out-of-area contingencies off the peninsula. This has limited the ability to include USFK, and thus the most robust alliance institutions, in regional frameworks and strategy. However, on May 18, 2021, USFK commander nominee General Paul LaCamera said in his confirmation hearing that he would advocate for the inclusion of USFK forces and capabilities in the Indo-Pacific Command's (USINDOPACOM) planning:

Today, the Republic of Korea-U.S. Alliance is, and should remain, squarely focused on the immediate threat from North Korea. The Alliance constantly updates its posture and plans as the security environment evolves. *Given the global role of the U.S. military and, increasingly, the international reach of the South Korean military, opportunities are emerging for Alliance cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula.* United States Forces Korea forces are uniquely positioned to provide the Commander USINDOPACOM a range of capabilities that create options for supporting out-of-area contingencies and responses to regional threats. *If confirmed, I will advocate for inclusion of USFK forces and capabilities in USINDOPACOM contingency and operational plans supporting U.S. interests and objectives in the region* (emphases added).⁷⁸

Even after LaCamera assumes command of the CFC, rapid shifts in the role and mission of USFK are unlikely although the possibility of new directives are increasingly possible throughout the 2020s. Anchoring the alliance to both countries' approaches to the Indo-Pacific, however, requires significantly deeper strategic and political considerations given crucial ramifications for USFK and the combined U.S.-ROK force posture.

While deterring North Korean aggression remains the priority in the alliance, over the past few years the U.S. geopolitical outlook has shifted to emphasize the importance of allied contributions in countering China. Under Biden, the Pentagon has continued to focus on its China mission as the "pacing threat" for the United States.⁷⁹ But for a combination of reasons as mentioned in a previous section, South Korea continues to focus primarily on the range of asymmetrical threats from North Korea and growing concern over regional trends, such as China's expanding military power.

Under the Biden administration, as the relationship between the two countries improves and U.S. policy becomes more predictable than it was over the past four years, there could be closer alignment between Seoul and Washington on Indo-Pacific security issues. But, South Korea is likely to be much more cautious than other U.S. allies such as Japan and Australia. The U.S.-ROK joint statement did not explicitly mention China but did voice agreement on a number of issues that directly concern Chinese influence in the region, including Taiwan, freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, and sustainable development in the Mekong subregion, where China's dam-building activity has disrupted local communities.⁸⁰ The inclusion of these issues, and particularly the mention of Taiwan for the first time ever in a joint statement, indicates that there may be more willingness on South Korea's part to engage with U.S. policy toward the region.⁸¹

But such willingness will only go so far. While South Korea has participated in the Quad Plus meeting on the coronavirus pandemic, and the Quad's latest joint statement did not mention China by name, South Korea is unlikely to formally join the Quad given the group's implicit mission of countering Chinese influence.⁸² Moon attended the G7 summit in Cornwall, United Kingdom, in June 2021, together with leaders from India, Australia, and South Africa.

In the final communique issued by the G7, it was noted, in part, that “we remain seriously concerned about the situation in the East and South China Seas and strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo and increase tensions.”⁸³ However, South Korean officials made great efforts to distance Seoul from any discussions of China during the summit, stating afterward that South Korea was not involved in any discussions related to China during the summit.⁸⁴ South Korean officials said it was because the topic was not raised in the expanded G7 meetings they had joined.⁸⁵

MOON'S ALLIANCE LEGACY AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

With less than a year left in his term, Moon does not have time to fundamentally reboot South-North relations. Throughout 2018 and into 2019, Moon was optimistic that a new era in inter-Korean ties was possible. Moon was ecstatic that he was able to engineer three summits with Kim Jong Un in 2018, including his September 2018 trip to Pyongyang. Indeed, Moon and senior officials from the president's office were hopeful that Kim Jong Un would be able to visit Seoul by the end of 2018 or in early 2019. Had he done so, Kim would have been the first North Korean leader to visit South Korea's capital in a time of peace. Even more historic was Trump's summit with Kim in Singapore in June 2018. But as Trump's second meeting with Kim ended in failure in Hanoi in February 2019, it was a stark reminder that Kim was unwilling to negotiate to satisfy Moon's or Trump's political and policy interests.

For the first four years of his administration, Moon had to deal with Trump's erratic North Korea policy

and his obsession with forcing allies, including South Korea, to pay their dues to the United States. Despite Trump's unorthodox approaches to North Korea—from initially threatening to blow up North Korea with nuclear weapons to embracing Kim in an unprecedented bromance—Moon was willing to work with Trump so long as a breakthrough was possible in the decades-long nuclear stalemate between North Korea and the United States.

Biden's victory in November 2020, however, not only ended Trump's North Korea folly, but it also closed the door for any major movement in South-North relations. While the Biden administration sent out early feelers to North Korea, Pyongyang maintained its stance that without a change in the United States' so-called hostile policy toward North Korea, it was unwilling to accommodate the new U.S. administration.

The May 2021 U.S.–South Korea summit, however, was a major turning point not only on future trajectories for the alliance but also in terms of Moon's pivoting to the United States. Conservatives in South Korea remain skeptical on Moon's new alignment with the United States, but the May 2021 summit was a success on three key aspects. First, the United States and South Korea forged cooperation in nontraditional areas, including pandemic-driven health security; accelerated mitigation of climate change; joining forces to ensure more resilient supply chains for the United States, its allies, and global partners; and paying attention to economic and security developments in areas such as the Mekong delta and Central America. Second, for the first time, a South Korean president agreed to include language in the joint statement on the importance of maintaining a liberal, international order and maintaining stability in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. And third, the United States embraced South Korea as a full-fledged ally including on defense, diplomacy, global issues, advanced technologies, and contributions to the global commons.

Well after he leaves office, analysts and pundits are going to debate what caused Moon to join hands with Biden. But without articulating Seoul's inner concerns, the Moon administration is likely to have been influenced by China's growing shadows across the peninsula and Northeast Asia and the critical importance of strengthening South Korea's economic and technological leverages. Regardless of the intensity of South Korea's zero-sum domestic politics, its leaders also recognize the importance of deepening the U.S.-ROK alliance, not only because it bolsters South Korea's defense capabilities vis-à-vis North Korea (and even China) but also because the alliance is a key conduit to significantly amplify South Korea's global ambitions and presence.

For a president who was determined to break the mold in South-North relations and to support the normalization of U.S.-North Korea ties, Moon seems poised to leave office with his biggest foreign policy mark on the reinvigoration of the Seoul-Washington alliance. Although many of the policy recommendations noted below are likely to be picked up by Moon's successor should they opt to do so, Moon and Biden will be able to consolidate the alliance by considering the following steps.

First, the two presidents should create a bilateral science and technology commission that investigates how the United States and South Korea, together with other allies and partners, can pool their resources on building more secure supply chains, developing critical technologies, and paving the way for a new science and technology alliance including cooperation in the defense and space sectors.

Second, South Korea should deepen its participation in the Quad's working groups to strengthen coordination with the Quad members on nontraditional security threats including climate change, pandemic management and prevention, and energy transitions.

Third, South Korea should appoint a presidential envoy for climate change that will enable South Korea to have a greater presence in critical climate change discussions and to more effectively coordinate climate change initiatives with global partners.

Fourth, the United States and South Korea should boost joint and collaborative R&D on emerging defense and space technologies, the future of hybrid conflicts and technologies, and bolstering interoperability through diverse military alliance scenarios into the 2020s and 2030s. Joint collaboration on unmanned weapons systems, AI-driven platforms, and 6G networks, for example, will strengthen the alliance's technological cooperation wing.

Fifth, the two sides should set up new institutional relationships between their major defense and space research institutes to bolster joint and complementary R&D initiatives. Significant effort should be given to involving next-generation researchers, policy analysts, and entrepreneurs.

Sixth, counterintelligence efforts should be strengthened against industrial and commercial espionage operations by third countries and foreign entities. When appropriate and necessary, the relevant intelligence agencies should enhance joint counter cyber attack operations and initiatives.

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