Who will Handle the Korean Conflict under Biden, and How?

We have already made preliminary predictions about what the new US president's course on the Korean Peninsula will look like. Now that Joe Biden has introduced some of his team and partially spoken out himself, some things are further clarified.

Let's start with Biden himself. We recall that he was critical of the meetings between Trump and Kim, insisting that they only gave the North Korean dictator what he had long desired: global recognition as the leader of a nuclear state. He called Kim Jong-un a cutthroat, but at the October 22 presidential televised debate, Biden acknowledged the possibility of his summit with Kim - but only if the North first agrees to reduce or give up its nuclear arsenal.

Back in October 2020, Biden wrote an article titled "Hope for Our Better Future" exclusively for the Yonhap News Agency. In it, he pointed out that the ROK-US alliance was designed to protect peace in East Asia and praised the ROK as a "shining example of a flourishing democracy and economic powerhouse." The article concerned the North as well: "As President, I'll stand with South Korea, strengthening our alliance to safeguard peace in East Asia and beyond, rather than extorting Seoul with reckless threats to remove our troops. I'll engage in principled diplomacy and keep pressing toward a denuclearized North Korea and a unified Korean Peninsula, while working to reunite Korean Americans separated from loved ones in North Korea for decades".
However, the Build Back Better website he launched lists mainly internal problems as top priorities: COVID-19, economic recovery, racial equality, and climate change. The DPRK was not mentioned there or in the inaugural speech (unlike Obama's and Trump's speeches, which touched on the subject).

On Nov. 23, 2020, Joe Biden named Anthony Blinken, who has held foreign policy positions for more than 25 years, serving in Barack Obama's administration as Deputy National Security Adviser from 2013 to 2015 and Undersecretary of State from 2015 to 2017, as US Secretary of State. As Hudson Institute Asia-Pacific Security Committee Chairman Patrick Cronin notes, Blinken was Joe Biden's chief foreign policy adviser and was part of the inner circle of national security decision-making under Barack Obama and Bill Clinton.

Shortly before the presidential election, Blinken was a member of Biden's three-person foreign policy advisory panel, which included former Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Brian McKeown.

Antony Blinken is a vocal critic of Trump's DPRK policy. He once called Kim Jong-un one of the worst tyrants and North Korea the worst concentration camp. He believes that if North Korea does not accomplish its denuclearization, the United States should continue sanctions, although they could be relaxed in exchange for a partial dismantlement of the North's nuclear weapons.

But the ROK media notes that he once said that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), aimed at limiting Tehran's nuclear activities, would be the best deal President Donald Trump could reach with North Korea, even though Trump rebuked it as the worst deal ever negotiated.

In his June 11, 2018 New York Times article, the day before the Singapore summit between Trump and Kim Jong-un, Blinken promoted the Iranian agreement, especially emphasizing "a sweeping inspections regime." In addition, Blinken hinted at an "interim deal" option. "The administration may find merit in an interim agreement that requires North Korea to disclose all of its programs, freeze its enrichment and reprocessing infrastructure under international monitoring and destroy some warheads and missiles in return for limited economic relief ... That would buy time to negotiate a more comprehensive deal, including a minutely sequenced road map."

At a confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on January 20, 2021, Blinken said, "we have to review and we intend to review the entire approach and policy toward North Korea because this is a hard problem that has plagued administration after administration, and it's a problem that has not gotten better". In this context, the new government "will begin by looking at what options it has to increase pressure on North Korea to come to the negotiating table, as well as what other diplomatic initiatives may be possible." This review will "start with consulting closely with our allies and partners, particularly with South Korea and with Japan and others." The US cannot solve all the world's problems alone, so it needs cooperation and partnership with other countries, Blinken emphasized.

Noting the possible need for increased pressure on North Korea, Blinken agreed that international sanctions on the North should not inadvertently harm the North Korean people: "I think in North Korea and in other similarly situated places, we have to have an eye clearly on the people of the country in question, and do what we can to alleviate their suffering ... we have an eye on the humanitarian side of the equation, not just on the security side of the equation."

Former US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman may become the US Permanent Representative to the United Nations. During Bill Clinton's presidency, she was an adviser to the US State Department and special adviser to the president and secretary of state, as well as coordinator of U.S. policy toward North Korea. In particular, Sherman was involved in negotiations with the DPRK on nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, and was the lead negotiator on the Iran nuclear deal.

Jake Sullivan, a senior political adviser to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, has been named the new national security adviser. Little is known about his stance on the DPRK, but in an April 2018 post in the Washington Post — shortly before the Singapore summit — he mentioned North Korea's long standing strategy of first making a promise and then breaking it.

We know of another important appointment – on January 14, Joe Biden appointed former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell to a newly created position tentatively called "Asian Czar". More precisely, the coordinator for the Indo-Pacific region in the White House National Security Council, who will coordinate the Asian policies pursued by US government agencies. According to the Financial Times, the creation of this position shows that the new US administration attaches particular importance to relations with Asia. Campbell was heavily involved in the so-called "pivot to Asia" of the Barack Obama administration. This policy was designed to
contain China by strengthening regional alliances, military presence, and multilateral security and economic institutions. Prior to his appointment, he served as chairman and co-founder of Asia Group, a strategic consulting firm.

The ROK media in this context recall his article in Foreign Affairs magazine, where Campbell clearly outlined his approach to cooperation in containing China: "The United States should encourage new military and intelligence partnerships between regional states, while still deepening those relationships in which the United States plays a major role -- placing a "tire" on the familiar regional alliance system with a US hub and allied spokes," he added.

There Campbell also called for the creation of ad hoc bodies on specific issues to "keep China in check and maintain the US-led regional order." Campbell also touched on military deterrence, expanding on the so-called quartet, which currently includes the United States, Australia, India and Japan. "The purpose of these different coalitions -- and this broader strategy -- is to create balance in some cases, bolster consensus on important facets of the regional order in others, and send a message that there are risks to China's present course."

Campbell is known to have pondered how to promote reconciliation between Seoul and Tokyo, which are mired in quarrels over historical disputes, including the issue of "comfort women".

On November 20, 2020, Campbell stated that the resumption of humanitarian aid to North Korea could send a good message of patience as well as strengthen the joint efforts of South Korea and the United States to denuclearize the North.

On December 2, even before his appointment, in a webinar organized by the Atlantic Council and sponsored by the Korea Foundation, Campbell noted that the new US administration will have to decide quickly how it will deal with North Korea to have a better chance of engagement and send an "early signal" to the North before Pyongyang commits itself to provocations instead of dialogue. "What we saw at the Obama administration was a rather prolonged period of study, during which North Korea took provocative steps that basically headed off the possibility of engagement with North Korea." He believes the new administration should be bold, and he was not afraid to point out the rapprochement between Trump and Kim. Campbell also emphasized the need for the US to work with its Asian allies-South Korea and Japan-in the face of various challenges, including North Korea, and for allies to work with each other.

All this allows us to draw some preliminary conclusions. There are several options with regard to the DPRK. On the one hand, there is the possibility that the people on Biden's team who dealt with the DPRK under Obama, because of prior experience and for reasons of "just not like under Trump," will not be able to go beyond established limits and return "strategic patience" in the expectation that the combination of sanctions pressure and economic consequences from DPRK borders closed due to the pandemic will result in a "regime change." Since Obama, however, the North has made a significant leap in its nuclear missile program, and strategic patience has largely been built on the thesis that Pyongyang will not give up the bomb, but that nuclear threat to the US is negligible. This is not the case now, and Kim Jong-un's promise to increase his country's nuclear arsenal during the January WPK convention leaves little room for compromise on Pyongyang's complete denuclearization.

On the other hand, based on Blinken's experience, he is expected to attempt to conclude some version of an interim deal with the DPRK on the Iranian model, although the nuclear capabilities of Iran and the DPRK are incomparable: Pyongyang has already developed nuclear warheads and an assortment of ballistic missiles and other delivery vehicles. It would be a relatively good option if the US and the DPRK, albeit in a somewhat different vein, continued Kim and Trump's approach here: the problem cannot be solved amicably, but it can be paused, with both sides refraining from escalating the situation.

On the third hand, the DPRK is really not a problem of first priority, and if Pyongyang does not attract attention, political inertia will ensure the continuation of the freeze period for at least a year.

As for South Korea, the outlook is much more clear. Biden promises to intensify Washington's contacts with allies in the Asia-Pacific region, declaring that "America is strongest when it works with its allies." This means that trade wars or extra spending on US troops will most likely be curtailed, but Seoul will be required to take an active part in US-initiated coalitions, including those against China. In addition, Washington will try to befriend Seoul and Tokyo.

Nevertheless, much remains uncertain. We'll see who ends up as Special Representatives for Peninsula Affairs (a position now held by Stephen Bigen) or Human Rights. Therefore, the next material in this series will be large and devoted to how American and South Korean experts assess the direction and prospects of Biden's course.
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