

# U.S. and South Korean Policy Differences Require Deft Alliance Management

*Bruce Klingner*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S. and South Korea are on track to resolve negotiations on military cost-sharing but face challenges bridging policy gaps on North Korea and regional issues.

The Administration's aims are likely to conflict with Moon Jae-in's agenda focused on reconciliation with Pyongyang at the expense of denuclearization efforts.

Moving forward, the Administration should counsel caution against premature concessions to North Korea and urge South Korea to play a larger role in the region.

The United States and South Korea are on track to resolve deadlocked negotiations over military cost-sharing but face challenges in bridging policy gaps on North Korean and regional issues. The Biden Administration has described some parameters of its North Korea strategy, but much remains uncertain. However, it is already clear there will be significant differences with the Moon Jae-in administration, which is eager to resume U.S. and South Korean dialogue with Pyongyang. U.S. policymakers will need to balance maintaining resolve against North Korean transgressions with preventing discord with critical ally South Korea.

## Outlines of a Potential Deal

Media reports indicate that the Biden Administration is likely to accept an incremental 13 percent

---

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib6057>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

increase in South Korean host nation support to offset the cost of stationing U.S. forces there, as Seoul had offered previously.<sup>1</sup> Biden previously stated that he would not threaten to withdraw American troops from the Korean Peninsula.<sup>2</sup>

Abandoning the previous Administration's demand for a significant increase in South Korea's contribution to make a profit off stationing U.S. forces overseas would be a positive policy change and remove a major source of tension between Washington and its Asian allies.<sup>3</sup> The Biden Administration also appears likely to accept an interim agreement freezing Japanese contributions at current levels.<sup>4</sup>

The Biden Administration vowed to undertake a "new strategy" of principled diplomacy with North Korea, but details are pending completion of a lengthy North Korea policy review. However, Biden previously indicated he would return to a traditional "bottom up" policy formulation and diplomatic outreach to North Korea rather than the "top down" approach of summit meetings with little preparation. Biden commented that he would be willing to meet with Kim Jong-un but conditioned on the North Korean leader agreeing to reduce his nuclear weapons as well as significant progress at working-level meetings toward a detailed denuclearization agreement.<sup>5</sup>

The Biden Administration is likely to push North Korea more strongly on its human rights violations, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced the Administration would be looking at all available policy tools, including additional sanctions.<sup>6</sup>

Yet it remains unknown how strongly the Biden Administration will actually enforce sanctions or what would be the components of an acceptable North Korean denuclearization accord. Blinken had earlier suggested adopting an incremental arms control approach and "over time, [a] disarmament process put in place"<sup>7</sup> in "stages and phases."<sup>8</sup> There has been no mention by Biden officials of a peace declaration to end the Korean War.

The Biden Pentagon emphasized that the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON)<sup>9</sup> would take place only when previously agreed-upon conditions between Washington and Seoul had been fully met. Pentagon spokesperson John Supple stated that a commitment to a specific time frame "would put our forces and people at risk."<sup>10</sup>

## United States and South Korea Not on the Same Page

Each of these positions is the antithesis of those of the Moon Jae-in administration. President Moon's priorities are peninsular and focused on achieving success for his signature policy of reconciliation with Pyongyang

before the end of his term next year. Moon claims that Kim Jong-un remains intent on denuclearization despite its unveiling of several new nuclear-capable missiles and vows to expand its nuclear arsenal.

Moon advocates resumption of unconditional summit diplomacy, reduction of sanctions, signing a peace declaration, and offering North Korea massive economic benefits, all while downplaying Pyongyang's human rights conditions, ignoring regime violations of U.N. resolutions, and turning the other cheek to threatening, insulting diatribes against Seoul.

Last year, North Korea destroyed the inter-Korean liaison office and threatened additional military action.<sup>11</sup> Seoul responded by acquiescing to regime demands to inhibit South Korean freedom of speech by criminalizing efforts to send information into the isolated country via balloons and other means. New legislation would impose penalties of three years in prison or fines of \$27,000.

International human rights groups, Members of the U.S. Congress, and the U.N. special rapporteur on human rights in North Korea all criticized Seoul's legislation. The Moon administration has increasingly engaged in authoritarian tactics to stifle critics, hinder dissent, and curtail actions that would aggravate Pyongyang.

On alliance issues, Moon advocates completing wartime OPCON transition during his term despite there being no timeline for the process nor Seoul having yet achieved any conditions previously agreed upon with Washington. The transfer was also to follow an improvement in the regional security situation from the reduction or elimination of North Korea's nuclear force. Moon has suggested discussing and possibly negotiating allied combined military exercises with Pyongyang.<sup>12</sup> The South Korean minister of unification advocates continuing to cancel or curtail military exercises to garner favor with North Korea and induce dialogue.

## Building Regional Coalitions

The Biden Administration will continue to push its allies and partners to do more to oppose Chinese challenges to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific and the rules that undergird it. It is still early, but strategic competition with China appears to be as much the driving force behind its policy as it was for the Trump Administration's—albeit with differences in style and perhaps priorities.

For years, Washington has called for Seoul to more firmly criticize Chinese actions in the South China Sea and protect Korea's own sea lines of communication. That is likely to persist.

For its part, the Moon administration will resist efforts to draw South Korea into uncomfortable situations with China. It decries perceived U.S. pressure forcing South Korea to choose between Beijing, its largest trading partner, and Washington, its ally and security guarantor. Korea has long bemoaned its fate as the “shrimp amongst whales” in Asia. Seoul’s earlier willingness to stand up to Chinese threats against deploying the U.S. THAAD missile defense system in Korea led to extensive damaging boycotts against South Korean businesses.

## Moving Forward

Despite sharing similar strategic objectives, Washington and Seoul perceive two vastly different paths to achieve them. Frank exchanges of views between allies should be welcomed, but resolving policy differences is best done behind closed doors lest public furor harden government positions.

The Biden Administration should:

- **Clear the detritus from burden-sharing negotiations.** Washington should seek incremental increases in Seoul’s host nation support while being mindful of South Korea’s other contributions, such as paying for U.S. military construction projects. Washington should affirm commitment to defending South Korea by abandoning threats to reduce U.S. troops before the North Korean threat has been reduced.
- **Press Seoul to maintain conditions-based OPCON transfer.** South Korea should address lingering deficiencies in defense capabilities, including allowing resumption of large-scale military exercises when COVID-19 conditions allow. OPCON transfer should be based on security conditions rather than political expediency. Seoul has taken impressive steps to improve its military, but transition will not occur to the Moon administration’s tenure.
- **Counsel caution against prematurely offering concessions to North Korea.** Seoul is overeager to offer economic benefits, reduce sanctions enforcement, ignore North Korean violations, and lower the bar for North Korean actions in a quest to simply resume dialogue. Moon’s advocacy for a peace declaration has not been matched with explanations of what tangible benefits it would produce. Washington should first insist on tangible progress on denuclearization negotiations.

- **Urge South Korea to play a larger role in the Indo-Pacific.** Seoul should assume greater responsibilities in regional and global security challenges, including a larger role in ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. South Korea should remember that it shares values and principles with the United States and other countries that seek to redress China's intimidating and belligerent behavior and promote a free and open Indo-Pacific.

## Conclusion

The U.S.–South Korean alliance has played an indispensable role in maintaining peace and stability in northeast Asia. Seoul has also been a stalwart ally in providing troops for security and peacekeeping operations far from its shores. Maintaining the alliance as part of the broader bilateral relationship is critically important for achieving U.S. strategic objectives in Asia.

There will be differences in views on the policies and priorities of military and diplomatic policies. At times, these have seemed insurmountable and relations were severely tested. But the alliance always prevailed and will do so again. Both countries' well-being and security depend on it.

**Bruce Klingner** is Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia in the Asian Studies Center, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.

## Endnotes

1. Kylie Atwood, Nicole Gaouette, and Oren Liebermann, "US and South Korea Nearing Agreement on Cost Sharing for American Troops," CNN, February 10, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/10/politics/us-south-korea-cost-sharing-troops/index.html> (accessed February 16, 2021).
2. "Joseph R. Biden Jr.," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/politics/joe-biden-foreign-policy.html> (accessed February 15, 2021).
3. Bruce Klingner, James Jay Carafano, and Walter Lohman, "Don't Break Alliances Over Money," *National Interest*, November 22, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/don%E2%80%99t-break-alliances-over-money-98967> (accessed February 24, 2021); Bruce Klingner, Jung Pak, and Sue Terry, "Trump Shakedowns Are Threatening Two Key U.S. Alliances in Asia," *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-12-16/how-trump-is-threatening-alliances-in-asia> (accessed February 24, 2021); and Bruce Klingner, "U.S.-South Korea Burden-Sharing Talk Remain Stuck. Here's How to Fix It," *National Interest*, April 20, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/us-south-korea-burden-sharing-talk-remain-stuck-heres-how-fix-it-143477> (accessed February 15, 2021).
4. "Cost-Sharing Agreement for Hosting U.S. Forces to Remain Unchanged for 1 Year," *Yomiuri Shimbun*, February 12, 2021, <https://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0007140252> (accessed February 15, 2021).
5. Byun Duk-kun, "Biden Will Not Treat Allies as 'Protection Racket,' Says Adviser," *Yonhap*, October 11, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN2021009000600325> (accessed February 15, 2021).
6. Sarah Kim, "Biden Administration to Hold North Accountable, Emphasize Human Rights," *JoongAng Ilbo*, February 4, 2021, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/02/04/national/northKorea/US-State-Department-North-Korea-human-rights-leaflet-bill/20210204172600636.html> (accessed February 15, 2021).
7. David Brennan, "What Antony Blinken Has Said about Key Foreign Policy Issues," *Newsweek*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/what-antony-blinken-said-about-key-foreign-policy-issues-1549404> (accessed February 15, 2021).
8. CBS News, "Biden Foreign Policy Adviser Antony Blinken on Top Global Challenges," September 25, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/biden-foreign-policy-adviser-antony-blinken-on-top-global-challenges/> (accessed February 15, 2021).
9. In 1950, South Korea turned over OPCON of its military to the United Nations Command. In 1994, South Korea resumed peacetime (alliance) OPCON of its military forces. There have been discussions for years over returning wartime OPCON to Seoul.
10. "Pentagon Says OPCON Transfer Will Be Conditions-Based, Not Time-Based," *Donga Ilbo*, January 30, 2021, <https://www.donga.com/en/article/all/20210130/2405839/1/Pentagon-says-OPCON-transfer-will-be-conditions-based-not-time-based> (accessed February 15, 2021).
11. Bruce Klingner, "As North Korea Resumes Provocations, the U.S. Should Stand Firmly with Its Allies," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 5086, June 24, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/north-korea-resumes-provocations-the-us-should-stand-firmly-its-allies>.
12. "Moon Says S. Korea-U.S. Exercise Could Be Discussed with N. Korea If Necessary," *Yonhap*, January 19, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210118006700325> (accessed February 15, 2021).