

South Korean President Must Deliver in Meeting with President Biden

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The May 21, 2021, U.S.–South Korean summit meeting will certainly highlight the two countries' important diplomatic, economic, and military partnership.

The nations' differing policies, however, especially toward North Korea and China, necessitate frank private discussions.

President Biden should affirm unequivocal support for South Korea against regional security threats, and work toward aligning U.S.–South Korean strategic objectives.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in's summit meeting with President Joe Biden on May 21 at the White House will inevitably be graded against Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's highly successful visit in April.

Suga set the bar high for an ally, calling out China's human rights violations in Hong Kong and against Uighur Muslims, belligerent tactics in the East and South China Seas, and intimidation of Taiwan. President Moon must not fall short on these topics. On North Korea policy, the United States and Japan share a vision of maintaining pressure on North Korea until it begins to denuclearize, while Moon instead advocates concessions to Pyongyang and prioritizing a peace agreement.

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Alliance Issues

The military component of the U.S.–South Korean relationship will be less contentious during the summit meeting following the recently concluded bilateral Special Measures Agreement negotiations.¹ The Biden Administration accepted an incremental increase in South Korea’s contribution for offsetting the cost of stationing U.S. forces overseas, resolving a source of bilateral tension in recent years.

President Moon may continue his push for a near-term transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean forces from United Nations Command to Seoul. The United States will correctly respond that both nations agreed to a conditions-based transition, and that those conditions have not yet been met. While Seoul has made impressive progress in defense spending and developing additional capabilities, remaining shortfalls preclude OPCON transition during Moon’s term.²

North Korea Policy

With only a year left in office³ and plummeting public support, President Moon is seeking U.S. support to salvage his signature North Korea engagement policy. Moon recently declared that he would use his meeting with President Biden to jumpstart stalled inter-Korean and U.S.–North Korean dialogue and “find a way to step once again toward peaceful cooperation.” Moon vowed for his remaining time in office to “move from an incomplete peace toward one that is irreversible.”⁴

Moon encourages resuming unconditional summit diplomacy, reducing sanctions, signing a peace declaration, and offering North Korea massive economic benefits, all while downplaying Pyongyang’s deplorable human rights conditions, ignoring regime violations of U.N. resolutions, and ignoring its threatening, insulting diatribes against Seoul.

In April, South Korean Minister of Unification Lee In-young proposed unifying the North and South Korean economies while maintaining separate political systems. Previously, he advocated allowing North Korean firms to engage in profit-making business in South Korea, resuming South Korean tourism to the North, and constructing large-scale infrastructure projects in North Korea. All of the proposals would violate U.N. resolutions or U.S. laws, or both.

Although much remains unclear about the parameters of the Biden Administration’s North Korea policy, there is an emphasis on conditioning future summits on progress in denuclearization negotiations,

maintaining sanctions until Pyongyang reduces its nuclear and missile arsenals, and resuming criticism of the regime's human rights abuses. While the post-summit U.S.–South Korean joint statement will undoubtedly highlight a coordinated North Korea policy, the reality is that Washington and Seoul have very different priorities in their approaches toward Pyongyang.

South Korea Silent on Regional Issues

The U.S.–Japanese joint statement from the Biden–Suga summit should serve as a model for a similar document after Moon's visit. Washington and Tokyo expressed concern about China's use of economic and other forms of coercion in the Indo–Pacific region, unlawful maritime claims and activities in the South China Sea, and human rights violations in Hong Kong and the Xinjiang region, while underscoring the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.⁵

A U.S.–South Korean joint statement that does not include similar sentiments would reflect poorly on the Moon administration. South Korea has been reluctant to criticize Chinese coercive policies in the Indo–Pacific region. Seoul has complained of U.S. pressure forcing it to choose between Beijing, its largest trading partner, and Washington, its ally and security guarantor. As such, Seoul has resisted joining coalitions, such as the Quad-rilateral Security Dialogue, which pursues common objectives amongst Asian democracies and which Beijing claims is meant to “contain” China.

Moon's Domestic Travails

After winning worldwide praise a year ago for South Korea's initially strong response to the COVID-19 outbreak, Moon's government is now criticized for exceedingly slow vaccine distribution. His administration has also been plagued by several political scandals, corruption allegations, rising real estate prices, and domestic and international criticism over the government's increasing aggressive actions against critics. Moon's personal approval rating and that of his ruling party have plunged. The ruling party recently suffered defeats in mayoral elections in Seoul and Busan, seen as harbingers for next year's presidential election.

Lee Ho-seung, Moon's chief policy secretary, commented that securing a vaccine partnership with Washington would be a top priority for the summit. A poll in late April showed that, for the first time, the public's disapproval ratings for Moon's handling of the COVID-19 crisis surpassed the positive views. Another poll showed that nearly 30 percent of Koreans believe that securing vaccines should be Moon's top priority during the remainder of his term.⁶

What Washington Should Do

South Korea is a critically important diplomatic, economic, and military partner for the United States. Despite differences with the Moon administration, President Biden should affirm unequivocal support for South Korea against regional security threats and work toward aligning policies to achieve common strategic objectives. Specifically, the Biden Administration should:

- **Counsel South Korean restraint against prematurely offering concessions to North Korea**, before tangible progress on denuclearization, or to simply buy Pyongyang's return to negotiations. The allies should publicly affirm that denuclearization remains the required end state of negotiations. A peace agreement should be part of denuclearization talks but not offered in vain hopes it will alter North Korean behavior.
- **Urge South Korea to play a larger role in the Indo-Pacific**, including in ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. South Korea should be reminded 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.
- **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.
- **Advocate for improved South Korean-Japanese relations**. Continued animosity between America's two northeast Asian allies constrains effective responses to the growing North Korean and Chinese threats. The Biden Administration should work behind the scenes to seek compartmentalizing difficult historical issues to enable greater coordination to address the challenges of this millennium.

Conclusion

The U.S.–South Korean summit is an opportunity for both sides to affirm the importance of the bilateral relationship, as well as to prioritize the significance of the Indo-Pacific region to both countries. Public events

should underscore the long-standing friendship and common values of the two nations—but doing so should not prevent frank private discussions to overcome policy differences on crucial issues.

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Endnotes

1. Mitch Shin, "South Korea and US Reach Agreement on Defense Cost Sharing," *The Diplomat*, March 8, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/south-korea-and-us-reach-agreement-on-defense-cost-sharing/> (accessed May 14, 2021).
2. Bruce Klingner, "Enhance South Korean Military Capabilities Before OPCON Transfer," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3452, December 2, 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/enhance-south-korean-military-capabilities-opcon-transfer> (accessed May 12, 2021).
3. South Korea's constitution stipulates that the president serve a single five-year term and cannot be re-elected. The next presidential election will be held in March 2022.
4. Kim Ji-eun, "Moon Says He Will Pave Way to Peace on Korean Peninsula Ahead of US Visit," *Hankroyeh*, May 11, 2021, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/994745.html (accessed May 12, 2021).
5. News release, "U.S.–Japan Joint Leaders' Statement: 'U.S.–Japan Global Partnership for a New Era,'" The White House, April 16, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/16/u-s-japan-joint-leaders-statement-u-s-japan-global-partnership-for-a-new-era/> (accessed May 12, 2021).
6. Hyonhee Shin, "Analysis: S.Korea's COVID-19 Vaccine Shortages Overshadow Moon–Biden Summit," Reuters, May 12, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL4N2MT1ZB> (accessed May 12, 2021).