

2020 U.S. Presidential Election and Prospects for U.S. Policy toward East Asia

Abstract

As a result of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Joe Biden of the Democratic Party will take office for the upcoming four years. Although U.S. foreign policy is expected to be more stable and predictable in the Biden administration, it is likely that its foreign policy will produce a modified U.S. global leadership, which has the features of both Trump's America First foreign policy and the global leader of the liberal international order. Meanwhile, it is anticipated that U.S.-China relations could be more manageable in the Biden administration than it did in the Trump presidency even if U.S.-China strategic competition will persist. To maintain the strategic balance between U.S. and China, South Korea needs to pursue the 'principled diplomacy,' aimed at advancing its national interests based on the principles of 'openness, transparency, and inclusiveness.'

Introduction

The 2020 U.S. presidential election was held on November 3, 2020 and Joe Biden of the Democratic Party defeated the incumbent president Donald Trump of the Republican Party. It was reported that more votes were cast in 2020 than in any other U.S. election in history and the turnout rate of the 2020 presidential election, 66.5% as of Nov. 25, was the highest in more than a century. More than 150 million voters cast ballots in 2020 and it is more than 20 million higher than the 2016 record of 137 million votes cast. President-elect Joe Biden has earned more than 80 million votes (51%) and it is the most votes cast for any presidential candidate in U.S. history. President Trump has received about 74 million votes (47%) and it is the second-most votes in history.² Biden carried 25 states plus the District

of Columbia and one congressional district in Nebraska, totaling 306 electoral college votes while Trump carried 25 states plus one congressional district in Maine, totaling 232 electoral college votes.

The most important issue of the 2020 presidential election was the COVID-19. Before the coronavirus hit the United States at the beginning of this year, president Trump's reelection bid was high because he had maintained concrete supporters and the status of the national economy had been in a good condition. However, the pandemic changed significantly the national conditions of the 2020 presidential election and negatively affected president Trump's approval ratings. President Trump emphasized 'China bashing' and 'law and order' to take voters' attention away from the COVID-19. However, president Trump tested positive for the coronavirus early October and the issue of the



COVID-19 came to dominate the presidential campaign again.³

President-elect Biden has made it clear that his administration would abandon President Trump's America First approach and restore U.S. global leadership. He mentioned during the presidential campaign that his administration would reactivate diplomacy based on democratic values and principles and would make efforts to reinvent its relationships with allies, partners, and international organizations. It is expected, accordingly, that U.S. foreign policy and its relationships with allies could be more stable and predictable in the Biden presidency than his predecessor.

In this article, I will examine the domestic and international factors that could affect the Biden administration's foreign policy to see how far it could restore U.S. global leadership. Then I will discuss the prospects for the Biden administration's policy toward East Asia focusing on the diplomatic and security matters on the Korean Peninsula.

Biden Administration's Foreign Policy: Full Restoration of U.S. Global Leadership?

Domestic Conditions

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2. Domenico Montanaro, "President-Elect Joe Biden Hits 80 Million Votes In Year of Record Turnout," *National Public Radio*, November 25, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/government-politics/2020-11-25/president-elect-joe-biden-hits-80-million-votes-in-year-of-record-turnout>.
3. Min, Jeonghun, "Analysis of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election Results and Its Implications," *Analysis of Major International Issues*, Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, November 18, 2020.

It was expected that vote choices in battleground states would significantly affect the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Specifically, which candidate would be more successful in mobilizing supporters in six swing states, which include Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Florida, and Arizona, was expected to be critical to decide the winner of the election. Public opinion polls showed that vote margins of two candidates (Biden and Trump) would be narrow in the battleground states. As the polls expected, they had neck and neck competition in the six swing states on election day. Biden won four states (Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Arizona) by razor-thin margins while president Trump carried Florida and North Carolina.

The 2020 presidential election exit polls, which were conducted by the news consortium (ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC news),⁴ showed that over 90% of party supporters cast ballots to their party candidate. It means that both candidates succeeded in mobilizing their party supporters in 2020. In addition, party loyalty also affected how votes evaluated the main issues of the election such as COVID-19, economy, and racial discrimination. Most Democrats perceived that president Trump failed to cope with the COVID-19 and his response to 'Black Lives Matter' was controversial while many Republicans perceived that president Trump did a good job to cope with the coronavirus and economic recovery would be the most important issue of the election. These findings suggest that party polarization maintained its influence on voting behavior in 2020.

The exit polls also showed that vote choices of whites and independents in the six battleground states played a key role in deciding the winner of the election. Most importantly, white and independent voters in the three Rust Belt states (Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania) and Arizona increased their support for the Democratic

candidate in 2020 than they did four years ago and it was critical for Biden to carry the four states and eventually win the election.⁵

The significant impact of white voters' decisions in the Rust Belt on Biden's victory suggests that those voters' interests would be reflected in the Biden administration's policy. It is known that white voters in the Rust Belt supported Trump's 'America First' trade policy, which argued fair trade to prioritize American labor and industry's interests, in the 2016 presidential election. To bring their minds back to the Democratic side, Biden proposed 'Buy American' plan, which seems to be similar to Trump's America First trade policy, during the 2020 presidential campaign. It suggests that, instead of completely abandoning president Trump's America First trade policy, the Biden administration is likely to keep the main features of the fair trade argument to protect American labor and middle class' interests. Accordingly, whether the Biden administration will join 'Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership' (CPTPP) could be a useful indicator for its trade policy direction.

Meanwhile, even if president Trump failed to get reelected, he received about 74 million votes and it is the second-most votes cast for any presidential candidate in U.S. history. In addition, the exit polls show that president Trump received as many white votes in 2020 as he did four years ago. He also received more votes from Republicans (+6%), Blacks (+4%), Latinos (+4%), and Asians (+7%) in 2020 than he did in 2016.⁶ These results suggest that 'Trumpism' still places itself in many voters' minds although president Trump was defeated in 2020. In addition, there are many Republican leaders and aspirants who want to embrace president Trump's concrete supporters and mobilize their support for their political fortunes in the coming years. Therefore, it is expected that president Trump's America First arguments will maintain its domestic influence for

some time.

International Political Environment

Since the beginning of the 21st century, U.S. has gone through a series of mind-boggling events including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the 2008 financial crisis. Such events invoked a perception of American decline in the world, and American people have sent their support for focusing more on domestic issues and reformulating foreign policy to restore the national strength. Such political consideration has been reflected in both the Obama administration's offshore balancing strategy, and the Trump administration's America First foreign policy.

The Trump administration's America First foreign policy, which is featured by a tendency to put American interests first, pessimistic view on the role of the world's policeman, preference for bilateralism, stunted international cooperation, and dissonance among great powers, was spreading around the world during the Trump presidency. Such an international political environment became more pervasive through the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Many countries have been fighting against the coronavirus with entry ban and lockdown measures. They also feel that they need to bring the manufacturing facilities of vital medical supplies back home and it could lead to scale down the global value chain. In addition, the national crisis that the coronavirus created has contributed to making a nation state more important as a political actor and justified the need of a big government to protect public health and national security. Last but not least, taking into account that the world needs to cope with political and economic impacts that the pandemic crisis brought about within their borders, respectively, each country is going to focus its resources and efforts on dealing with domestic issues in the coming years.

These situations suggest that the features of the international political environment became sharper through the pandemic crisis and will maintain their influence for some time. It is not easy to expect that such characteristics in the international relations are likely to be changed abruptly with the advent of the Biden administration. Neither the U.S. Congress nor the American public wants their country to retake the role of the world's policeman.⁷ The Biden administration will also have to pay most attention to addressing domestic issues like fighting against the COVID-19 and recovering its economy in its early days in office. Last but not least, the cold fact that no other country has the ability to fill the power vacuum created by U.S. in the short term indicates that there is no reason why the global power should completely turn away from the America First approach.

In sum, the domestic conditions and international political environment that the Biden administration is facing are not likely to be supportive of the Biden administration's determination to fully restore U.S. global leadership during its first term in office. It is likely, therefore, that the Biden administration's foreign policy will produce a modified U.S. global leadership, which has the features of both Trump's America First foreign policy and the global leader of the liberal international order.

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4. CNN, "2020 U.S. Presidential Election Exit Polls," <https://edition.cnn.com/election/2020/exit-polls/president/national-results>.
 5. Min, Jeonghun, "Analysis of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election Results and Its Implications," *Analysis of Major International Issues*, Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, November 18, 2020.
 6. CNN, "2020 U.S. Presidential Election Exit Polls," <https://edition.cnn.com/election/2020/exit-polls/president/national-results>.
 7. Richard Haass, "The Pandemic Will Accelerate History Rather Than Reshape It," *Foreign Affairs*, April 7, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-07/pandemic-will-accelerate-history-rather-reshape-it>

Prospects for U.S. Policy toward East Asia

U.S.-China Relations in the Biden Administration

It is anticipated that U.S.-China rivalry or U.S.-China strategic competition will maintain in the Biden administration. It is mainly because China's capabilities, like economic and military power, are getting closer to those of the United States. The Trump administration identified China as a revisionist and put more emphasis on competition over cooperation with China. U.S. military strategy is also changing from war on terrorism to war among global powers, which is mainly focused on preparing for the military competition with China.

It does not mean, however, that U.S. is willing to get involved in serious competition or jump in a war situation with China in a short time period. U.S. has maintained its relative advantages over China politically, economically, and militarily, and, thus, it is likely that U.S. wants to maintain the current balance of power. Meanwhile, U.S. will make efforts to enhance its military capabilities to cope with the situation where China will directly challenge U.S. hegemony in the long run.

Even if U.S.-China strategic competition will persist, it is expected that U.S.-China relations could be less tense and their competition will be highlighted around high tech industries in the Biden administration. It is anticipated that the Biden administration will consider both competition and cooperation with China although it will put more emphasis on competition. The 2020 Democratic Party Platform suggests that the Biden administration will continue to compete with China to preserve U.S. interests in trade and high-tech industries. However, it will not resort to self-defeating, unilateral trade wars or fall into the trap of a new Cold War because those mistakes would only serve to exaggerate China's weight, over-militarize U.S. policy, and hurt American workers. Instead, the Biden administration

will emphasize international norms and principles to correct China's unfair trade practices. In addition, it will closely consult with its allies to cope with the rise of China. Meanwhile, the Biden administration will be open to work with China to cope with global problems such as climate change, COVID-19, extremism, terrorism, and nuclear nonproliferation.⁸

China does not want to make U.S.-China relations get worse because it is relatively weaker in power competition with the United States. Chinese government is likely to argue that it does not want to challenge U.S. hegemony and alter the balance of power in the region. In addition, even if Chinese government maintains its strong response for its domestic audience when a conflict occurs between the two global powers, it is willing to make concessions to manage its overall relationship with U.S. by becoming more flexible in its trade with U.S. such as purchasing more American products to reduce U.S. trade deficit with China and negotiating with U.S. about reforming its state-owned companies to meet the international norms. Although the negotiating process could be tough, such Chinese proactive efforts could be positively received by U.S. and provide the Biden administration with more political ground and space to manage its relations with China.

Taken together, it is more appropriate to posit that both countries do not want to go extreme in their relations. The two global powers are deeply interrelated with each other and they still need to work together for their national interests. In addition, they are willing to be open to cooperate with each other to cope with global problems. Last but not least, the Biden administration's policy on China would be more stable and predictable than his predecessor. It is expected, therefore, that U.S.-China strategic competition will persist but their relations could be more manageable in the Biden administration than it did in the Trump presidency.

ROK-U.S. Relations in the Biden Administration

It is expected that the Biden administration will restore its alliance system. Biden mentioned during the presidential campaign that his administration would make efforts to reinvent its relationships with allies, partners, and international organizations. Therefore, ROK-U.S. alliance will be robust in the Biden administration. Two countries have many things in common in stably managing the security situation on the Korean Peninsula and maintaining U.S. leadership in the region.

It does not necessarily mean, however, that two countries have the exactly same interests in operating the ROK-U.S. alliance. What the Biden administration wants to reinvent its alliance system includes its allies' extended roles and contributions such as improving interoperability, enhancing defense capabilities, extending responsibilities for the regional security, and extended financial contributions. Accordingly, two countries need to closely communicate and cooperate with each other to narrow the gaps that they could have in operating the ROK-U.S. alliance such as burden sharing and North Korean issues.

Regarding the issue of burden sharing, for example, South Korea has offered to increase its cost sharing burden by 13 percent from 870 million dollars it paid under last year's agreement, but the negotiations are currently deadlocked because the Trump administration requested a 50 percent spike to 1.3 billion dollars. Biden criticized during the presidential campaign that president Trump extorted Seoul with reckless threats to withdraw U.S. troop from South Korea under the situation where its ally has been facing the serious nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. He also mentioned that, as president, he would stand with South Korea and strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance to safeguard peace in East Asia. It is expected, therefore, that the issue of burden sharing

will be resolved reasonably with the advent of the Biden administration.

North Korea-U.S. Relations in the Biden Administration

The Biden administration is expected to resume bilateral working-level talks with Pyongyang in close consultation with Seoul and Tokyo. During the presidential campaign, Biden criticized President Trump for failing to make substantial progress through his 'summit diplomacy' with Chairman Kim Jung Un and just legitimizing the Kim's regime. Biden made it clear that he would not rely on personal ties with Chairman Kim to resolve North Korean issues. Biden also mentioned that he would maintain sanctions on North Korea until the North abandons its nuclear and missile programs while his administration would strengthen its ties with Seoul and Tokyo and urge China to put pressure on North Korea. It is expected, therefore, that the Biden administration's North Korean policy will proceed through working-level negotiations. If there is substantial progress in the working-level talks, they will likely discuss the possibility of holding a summit meeting between Washington and Pyongyang.

It is anticipated, however, that it will take some time before U.S. is ready to resume the talks with Pyongyang. The Biden administration will have to pay most attention to addressing domestic issues like fighting against the coronavirus and recovering economy in its early days in office. In addition, it usually takes about several months for a new U.S. administration to form its cabinet and finish its policy reviews. Washington also wants Pyongyang to take additional denuclearization measures

8. Democratic Party, "2020 Democratic Party Platform," <https://www.demconvention.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020-07-31-Democratic-Party-Platform-For-Distribution.pdf>.

to prove its commitment to denuclearizing itself to resume the nuclear talks. These situations suggest that North Korean issues are not likely to draw much attention to the Biden administration's early days in office and it is likely that North Korea-U.S. talks would be able to resume next summer at the earliest.

Pyongyang is expected to choose to improve the inter-Korean relations as a way of revitalizing North Korea-U.S. talks. North Korea has had difficult internal situations such as economic sanctions, COVID-19, and flood and it is inevitable to resume the talks with U.S. to essentially resolve the problems. If North Korean issues do not draw much attention to the Biden administration, Pyongyang's choice could be either making a serious provocation or improving the inter-Korean relations.

There is a possibility that North Korea will make a serious provocation to show off its improved Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) capabilities to attract U.S.' attention and enhance its bargaining power. Pyongyang could perceive that it does not need to observe the threshold of the talks with the Trump administration any longer and that demonstrating its improved ICBM capabilities could be a strategically useful way to enhance its bargaining power. If Pyongyang proves that its improved ICBM capabilities can pose a direct threat to the U.S. mainland, it would not be easy for the Biden administration to close the window of the talks with North Korea and return to the 'strategic patience'. Ignoring such a direct security threat to the U.S. mainland could be criticized domestically that the Biden administration does not take an appropriate response to protect U.S. citizens' safety and property from an unacceptable security threat of a rogue nation.

It would be inevitable, however, that North Korea-U.S. relations will get worse and it will take some time before they can talk about the resumption of the nuclear talks. In addition, The term of Moon Jae-in government, which has been willing to improve the inter-Korean relations,

will be over during the first half of 2022 and, thus, North Korea's serious provocation could result in losing the possibility of resuming the nuclear talks with South Korea's active mediating and facilitating roles next year. In addition, North Korea's serious provocation will push China to put more pressure on North Korea and make it harder for China to assist North Korea economically. Chinese assistance is currently vital for North Korea to manage its economy and, thus, it would not be an easy choice that North Korea is willing to make its relations with China worse by a serious provocation. These overall situations suggest that it is more likely that North Korea will improve the inter-Korean relations and expect South Korea's active roles for the resumption of North Korea-U.S. talks.

The outlook that North Korea is likely to choose to improve the inter-Korean relations as a way of revitalizing its talks with U.S. also reflects the situation that China could play a limited role to resume the nuclear talks as U.S.-China conflict has been intensified. To make progress in the talks between North Korea and U.S., a third party's mediating and facilitating roles are needed because they have wide differences in their situational awareness and opinions. South Korea or China could play such mediating and facilitating roles for the nuclear talks. It is not easy to expect, however, that China would play an active role for the nuclear talks because of the intensifying U.S.-China conflict. Many Washington experts point out that it would not be easy for the two global powers to actively cooperate with each other for North Korean nuclear problems under the situation where U.S.-China conflict has been intensified. It is more likely that the Biden administration will push China to fully implement sanctions against North Korea rather than ask Beijing to play an active role to persuade Pyongyang to change its positions on the denuclearization.

The situation that Washington is getting more

aggressive to check the rise of China is the biggest challenge for Beijing. As a way of coping with such a challenge, China is trying to maintain good relationships with its neighboring countries, such as South Korea and Japan, to prevent them from leaning toward U.S. It is not likely, therefore, that China is willing to cause diplomatic troubles with U.S. and its allies to actively assist North Korea. In addition, China has considered its relations with U.S. when it makes decisions on North Korea-China relations. Accordingly, it is unlikely that China is willing to expand the scope of the conflict with U.S. to support North Korea more actively under the situation that its relations with U.S. is already the biggest challenge for Beijing. China cannot afford it.

These situations suggest that China is likely to prioritize managing North Korean issues stably, rather than actively support for North Korea's interests in the international community, for some time and continue to economically assist North Korea silently. Such limited levels of Chinese support will not be able to meet Pyongyang's expectations and need and, thus, Pyongyang will perceive that it would be a better option to utilize Seoul to resume the talks with Washington. Accordingly, it is more likely that North Korea will take a policy direction to improve the inter-Korean relations and expect South Korea's active roles to reactivate the nuclear talks. It is expected that North Korea will be more actively responsive to South Korea's proposals for improving inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation in the coming months. These situations suggest that there would be the second round of the bilateral talks between Washington and Pyongyang with Seoul's active mediating and facilitating roles with the advent of the Biden administration.

It is necessary to prepare for the second round of the nuclear talks among South Korea, U.S. and North Korea. The Biden administration will go through its policy reviews for several months and then its North

Korean policy will be more specified. Moon Jae-in government is required to play active roles to prevent North Korea from making a serious provocation and prepare for the resumption of the nuclear talks by closely communicating with Pyongyang and Washington.

In order to provide a momentum to resume the nuclear talks, it is necessary to discuss how to set the starting point of the negotiations. After the two summit meetings, both sides came to be fully aware of what the other side wants with regard to North Korea's denuclearization. Many Washington experts mention that the Trump administration's maximum pressure policy on North Korea has not met expectations. They point out that the possibility of North Korea's giving up its nuclear weapons is very low. Washington needs a more realistic approach to North Korean nuclear problems because Pyongyang has advanced its nuclear capabilities despite tough economic sanctions. Meanwhile, some point out that the Biden administration should not abandon what the Trump administration has achieved in the talks with North Korea, such as communication channels with Pyongyang and Steve Biegun team's discussions about North Korea's denuclearization process during the Trump administration.

Based on what has been discussed between Biegun team and North Korean delegation, it is necessary to come up with a more flexible denuclearization process that both sides could accept. Specifically, on the one hand, it is needed to clarify the end state of North Korea's denuclearization. It is essential to make sure that North Korea's complete denuclearization is the goal of the nuclear talks to stably manage the entire negotiating process. If it is not clearly set, there is a possibility that future negotiations could face difficulties arising from changes in strategic or political environments. Therefore, it is necessary to propose a more flexible and sustainable end state of North Korea's denuclearization. 'Complete dismantlement of all nuclear weapons and existing

nuclear programs and middle and long range ballistic missiles and ICBMs' could be an acceptable definition of North Korea's complete denuclearization.

On the other hand, it is necessary to provide North Korea with motivations for bringing it back to the negotiating table. Washington needs to provide Pyongyang with its list for corresponding measures showing how it could relieve or lift economic sanctions imposed to North Korea and guarantee North Korean regime security in accordance with Pyongyang's denuclearization measures. North Korea has argued that it already took denuclearization measures such as suspending nuclear and missile tests, shutting down Punggyeri nuclear test site, and handing over the remains of American soldiers killed in the Korean War. Pyongyang argues that it is Washington's turn to take corresponding measures in accordance with such denuclearization measures. It is expected that Washington's list for corresponding measures could provide Pyongyang with a useful justification for returning to the negotiating table, and increase its chances of accepting deals in the denuclearization process.

Last but not least, it seems appropriate for North Korea's denuclearization process to proceed with two steps: 'nuclear freeze' and 'nuclear dismantlement'. To restart the denuclearization process, Pyongyang needs to freeze its nuclear capabilities which include suspending nuclear and missile tests and nuclear materials production, and shutting down facilities to produce fissile materials. Washington then needs to provide Pyongyang with corresponding measures such as partial lifting of economic sanctions, the end-of-war declaration, and establishment of liaison offices. Both sides' sincere commitment to taking such initial measures would not only contribute to enhancing mutual trust but also function as a momentum to make further progress in the negotiations. Then the two sides will be able to gradually move on to the second step of the denuclearization

process. What involved parties learned from the negotiating process for the September 19 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks and the following implementation measures is expected to contribute to facilitating the negotiating process.

Conclusion

As examined above, it is expected that U.S.-China strategic competition would persist in the Biden administration. The outlook poses a serious challenge to South Korean diplomacy that needs to maintain the strategic balance between the two global powers. How can South Korean diplomacy find a breakthrough facing such a great challenge? South Korea's effective, successful handling of the coronavirus outbreak provides a strong momentum for the middle power to pursue a 'principled diplomacy,' aimed at advancing its national interests based on the principles of 'openness, transparency, and inclusiveness.'

The coronavirus, whose first case was reported in the Chinese city of Wuhan, was spread to South Korea. Faced with the spike in confirmed COVID-19 cases, South Korean authorities formulated and implemented a systematic model designed to combat the virus through fast diagnosis, contact tracking, and strict isolation measures. Combined with the devoted efforts of medical staffs and health officials and Korean people's mature civic awareness and cooperation, situations were brought under control in a rapid and timely manner. As a result, the Korean model of containing the virus without entry ban and lockdown measures drew international attention, and many countries came to perceive that the model was built on the universally acceptable principles of 'openness, transparency, and democratic procedures' and South Korean medical supplies are reliable. In other words, the international community witnessed how

successfully South Korea was coping with the pandemic crisis based on the universal principles and obtained a positive perception that South Korea is reliable and trustworthy.

The global spread of the principles of the Korean model has offered a strong momentum for South Korea to push forward its middle power diplomacy with universal principles: openness, transparency, and inclusiveness. Moon Jae-in government has expressed its intention to cooperate with core regional players based on the diplomatic principles. Specifically, with an open mind, South Korea welcomed both Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision of the United States and China's Belt and Road Initiative. It is also making consistent efforts

to figure out how its New Southern Policy could move forward with them.

South Korea's middle power diplomacy with the universal principles will support its strategic moves under the situation where the two global powers put pressure to South Korea to take a side between them. It is because such universal principles provide South Korea with a superior cause and allow the middle power to justify its strategic decisions between U.S. and China. When South Korea makes consistent efforts to pursuing its principled diplomacy, Korean middle power diplomacy will also be able to secure diplomatic ground and space to go with other middle power countries and expand its global influence.

