

May You Live in Interesting Times

- A successful US-ROK summit amidst regional uncertainties -

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[Abstract] The Biden-Yoon summit provides a useful platform to assess the state of the US-ROK alliance and its ability to respond to the changing security environment in northeast asia. Challenges include the worsening military threat from North Korea, possible disagreements over nuclear weapons policy more broadly, shortcomings of governance. But the current alignment of views between Washington and Seoul suggests resilience in the alliance and political will to strengthen it.

* This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Jeju Peace Institute

Early readout of the summit

The recent summit between US President Joe Biden and Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol was, by most metrics, a solid success. The two men, one a seasoned politician and the other a newcomer, established a personal relationship, and revalidated and expanded the bilateral security alliance. They even helped bring the concept of security into the 21st century, by putting economic security along side the unresolved and acute challenge of North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities and its defiance of the "rules-based order."

President Biden's first trip to Asia was carefully choreographed to begin with the dynamic relationship with Seoul, now a global partnership based on shared values of democracy, economic prosperity and the power of technology. His next stop was Japan, where the security agenda is addressed in both the bilateral alliance and the minilateral Quad, involving Japan, Australia and India, but not Korea. That leg of the trip focused on showing solidarity among Asian states on the challenge from China, warning Beijing to avoid Russia's strategic catastrophe by aggressive action on Taiwan.

Koreans may be pleased that the Biden visit overall struck a positive tone of renewed alignment of interests, and a robust agenda for bilateral cooperation across a wide spectrum of issues. Korea was spared the need to say more about China than it wanted to. But it will require further work to see if Korea could or should be more tightly tethered to the Quad,

whether more needs to be done to improve Japan-Korea relations in the security realm, and how Korean public and private sector elites will handle the possible blowback from China as Korea moves back from balancing its ties to the US and China to a less equivocal solidarity with Washington.

American pundits across the political spectrum have praised the summit and the way the Biden team has coordinated its Indo-Pacific strategy. But as the Council on Foreign Relations Scott Snyder has written (<https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/biden-south-korea-visit-yoon-alliance-north-korea>), the true success of the summit will depend on how Japan, China and North Korea react to it. To date, North Korea has remained silent on the Yoon-Biden offer to help with the DPRK's Covid crisis. China has reacted negatively to the new Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, a late effort to repair the damage from Trump's withdrawal from the Transpacific Partnership (TPP), and US absence from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RECEP), a free trade agreement that includes Korea and other friends of the US.

Georgetown University's Victor Cha (<https://www.csis.org/node/65531>) sees one measure of its success in Yoon's invitation to participate in the late June NATO summit in Madrid. Cha also sees geopolitical consequence in Yoon's unabashedly pro-American stance. After a period of near neutrality in ROK foreign policy, there's a reversal of fortunes in China's efforts to place a wedge between Seoul and Washington. And Yoon's position is reinforced by signs that young Koreans are more wary of China, and feel some solidarity with their counterparts in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

But American experts also point to some elements of continuity in the bilateral relationship from former President Moon to President Yoon. The talk of economic security, technology and supply chain resilience began during the Biden-Moon summit in 2021. Much of the groundwork laid by regional experts in government ministries to restore a more comprehensive US-ROK partnership began early in the Biden Administration, well before the elections that brought President Yoon into office.

The upbeat tone of the Biden-Yoon summit cannot disguise the fact that the environment in Northeast Asia is fraught with dangers. Most are related to the acute security predicament on the Korean peninsula, but some are broader in scope.

North Korea

At the May 24 Symposium “Prospect for Peace on the Korean Peninsula in Northeast Asia’s Changing Security Landscape,” organized by the Center for Security Policy Studies of George Mason University’s Incheon campus, the mood of the moment was captured vividly by Robert Collins, a former US military officer long resident in Korea. He told the audience that conditions in North Korea are worse than at any time since 1953, at two extremes. The DPRK’s offensive capabilities from nuclear weapons, missiles, and cyber war are only getting stronger, while the socio-economic conditions are facing severe crisis. The outbreak of Covid means that the crop cycle is likely to be disrupted, exacerbating an already fragile food security situation, due to climate change, economic mismanagement, and global supply chain disruptions. He foresaw food insecurity that could trigger social unrest and a severe humanitarian crisis.

Others conveyed the dangerous uncertainties emanating from North Korea in different ways. Jeju Peace Institute President Intaek Han characterized the regional environment as not favorable to the ROK, with North Korea’s expanding strategic capabilities presenting Seoul with some hard choices about its own defense requirements. Many Koreans believed that North Korean missiles were aimed at Tokyo or Washington, but the development of tactical nuclear weapons with shorter ranges means Seoul cannot deny the threat to its own territory.

The worsening military situation, in his view, has a direct impact on the US-ROK alliance, which needs to come to terms with the limits of both the soft approach – sunshine, strategic patience – and the hard approach of sanctions and military coercion. As the ROK is now fully recognized as an active middle power, it’s time to adapt the alliance to that new reality, and develop a new division of labor between the two states.

Korean experts are exploring new approaches to engaging the north, with the understanding that neither the Yoon administration nor the powers in Pyongyang are eager to open a new dialogue just for its own sake. It was striking that the joint statement by Presidents Biden and Yoon declared “President Yoon and President Biden emphasize that the path to dialogue remains open toward peaceful and diplomatic resolution with the DPRK and call on DPRK to return to negotiations.” The overall tone of the joint statement, nonetheless, emphasized the need to expand US-ROK military preparedness, to revalidate extended deterrence, and to remove any ambiguity about the US commitment to Korean security. The statement acknowledged President Yoon’s “audacious” plans to try to engage the north with economic incentives, but it was not a declaration of new diplomacy.

The discussion among Koreans about new approaches to engagement are still one-sided, with little evidence that the north wants to take advantage of offers of public health and food security assistance, and no evidence of a desire to talk about nuclear restraint. So for the United States, still trying to restore some predictability to US policy after the roller coaster of the Trump administration, which lurched from “fire and fury” to love letters, it would be hard to engage without some sign of willingness to talk about the hard issues. Should humanitarian conditions deteriorate and require a global response, the US would likely be a contributing player, but might prefer to see a UN lead.

Nuclear Dangers

In the absence of any momentum towards a serious process of denuclearization, American officials would probably agree with Dr. Han’s assessment that deterrence is the policy imperative for now and the foreseeable future. Both American and Korean officials are not ready to concede that denuclearization is unachievable, and they prefer to consider it a long-term objective. Normalizing North Korea’s nuclear status, as the international community slowly and reluctantly did with Pakistan and India, is still unpalatable and not on either country’s policy agenda.

Should Koreans decide to pursue its own nuclear weapons program, which public opinion in Korea seems to favor, it would complicate US-ROK relations in many ways. The US would be compelled to oppose such a decision as determined by its global nonproliferation policy, and it would create significant friction in the bilateral relationship. The desire by the ROK to achieve greater self-sufficiency in national security is well understood, but US officials would likely try to persuade their counterparts in Seoul to achieve that goal in other ways.

Other Alliance Management Issues

When the two leaders met, the discussion predictably focused on the broad principles of alliance purpose and resolve. But after the fanfare, the civilian and military officials in Washington and Seoul who implement the policy still have to contend with a myriad of alliance management issues. At the George Mason symposium, retired general In-Bum Chun brought the happy talk of a successful summit down to the realities of day to day business.

On the transfer of Yongsan Base to Korean control, he seemed to chide both sides, but perhaps the US in particular, for the painfully slow process of environmental reviews and assurances of safety standards. Some hope that President Yoon’s quick decision to move the presidential offices to the area will accelerate the process and allow Korea to transform the

base into a large civilian park.

Expanding the UN Command and updating its mission to include a larger portion of Korean, versus international, staff would be another useful task for the alliance. While the US Army has performed its function admirably over many decades, the commission's composition and its core tasks could be refreshed to move, in the words of Deputy Secretary Mike Bosack, from negative peace to positive peace. This would mean not just enforcing the 1953 armistice but facilitating peace efforts and reinforcing the "rules based order."

Shortcomings of Governance

This brings us to acknowledging that governance challenges will also shape each of the parties' ability to achieve their security objectives. In the case of North Korea, the system itself, with paramount power in the party, not the formal institutions, means that security decisions are often driven by political rather than true security imperatives. In the ROK, the even split in the electorate could suggest that the new administration may have less room to implement radical changes in policy, and some fear a populist streak that could drive security decisions and complicate US-ROK coordination on key concerns.

As for the United States, the domestic politics and the polarization of the society are evident for all US partners and adversaries to see and exploit to their advantage. It cannot be denied that the erosion of respect for political institutions has an impact on foreign countries' trust in US reliability. The Biden Administration is quite passionate about restoring US credibility, but even close allies see the fragility of those efforts, given the prospect for another change in the White House only two years down the road.

China

Finally, any discussion of the US-ROK alliance has to be put in the geopolitical frame of how the US is managing the challenge of China's rise. As part of the Biden team's careful orchestration of the president's travel to Asia, Secretary of State Tony Blinken gave a major address on May 26 in which he called out China for undermining the rules, principles and institutions that enabled its rise, and declared US intention to shape the strategic environment around China to advance the vision of an open, inclusive international system. He explained the approach as "invest, align and compete." (<https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>)

The direction of US policy to China need not create any significant distress to Korea, given

the current alignment of interests in improving security cooperation and dealing with regional challenges. One can easily imagine tensions ahead, should US-China relations worsen, or should US and Korean priorities in the region diverge over tactical requirements. The recent summit suggests resilience in the partnership, and one hopes that such resilience will suffice when the uncertainties in the regional environment test it.

Author Bio

Ellen Laipson is the Director of the International Security program at the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University and directs the Center for Security Policy Studies. She joined GMU in 2017 after a distinguished 25 -year career in government and as President and CEO of the Stimson Center (2002-2015). She serves on a number of non-governmental boards related to international security and diplomacy. Her last post in government was Vice Chair of the National Intelligence Council (1997-2002). She also served on the State Department's policy planning staff, the National Security Council staff, and worked at the Congressional Research Service for more than a decade. A member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the American Academy of Diplomacy, she serves on the Advisory Councils of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, and Notre Dame's International Security Center. She was a member of the CIA External Advisory Panel from 2006-2009, President Obama's Intelligence Advisory Board from 2009-2013, and on the Secretary of State's Foreign Affairs Policy Board 2011-2014. Laipson has an M.A. from the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University and an AB from Cornell University.

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