

## Prospects & Perspectives



For the very first time in U.S.-Korea partnership, they emphasized “the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.” Picture Source: President Joe Biden, *Facebook*, <<https://www.facebook.com/POTUS/photos/224127986330404/>>.

### The Biden-Moon Summit: What It Means for the Indo-Pacific Region

By *Yeh-chung Lu*

**U**.S. President Joe Biden received President Moon Jae-in of South Korea at the White House on May 21, 2021. The summit is symbolic, as this



was the first time for the two gentlemen to meet after Biden's inauguration in January as part of Biden's plan to realize the goal of regaining U.S. credibility and leadership around the world. For Moon, the not-so-chummy bromance between him and Trump worried South Korea, and this summit served as a great opportunity to reaffirm bilateral ties with the U.S. and to boost his own popularity at home in the less-than-one-year tenure in presidency.

### **U.S.-Korea Alliance for a New Chapter**

President Biden seems to have a clear goal in mind and a blueprint in carrying out his foreign policy. In March, he participated in the virtual meeting of the Quad and sent out two Secretaries for field trips into the Indo-Pacific Region. After consultations with close allies, Biden's top diplomats conversed in Alaska with their counterparts from the serious competition to America (China). Not only is the sequence deserving of our attention, the substance is even more significant. Taking these meetings together, the overarching issues include coping with Covid-19, climate change, strengthening the global supply chain of semiconductors, and promoting values and democracy.

In the joint statement, Biden and Moon reaffirmed this partnership is "a linchpin for the regional and global order" and shared the "vision for a region governed by democratic norms, human rights, and the rule of law at home and abroad." Denuclearization with the means of both dialogues and sanctions remains a common goal of the two allies. In addition, by not calling out names, the two presidents agreed to "oppose all activities that undermine, destabilize, or threaten the rules-based international order and commit to maintaining an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific." Also, for the very first time in the U.S.-Korea partnership, they emphasized "the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait."

In their exchanges, Biden agreed to terminate the revised missile guidelines originally signed in 1979 to cap South Korea's missile capabilities, marking progress for the Moon administration in regaining "missile sovereignty" and being more independent from U.S. control over national defense. Biden also announced the appointment of Ambassador Sung Kim, a well-seasoned diplomat with a North Korean portfolio, as special envoy on North Korea. Moon consented to cooperate with the Quad, ASEAN, and the U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral mechanism, on issues ranging from vaccine



supplies, digital transformation, and climate change, to Burma and the South China Sea.

### **The China Factor**

China weighs heavy in Biden's blueprint for diplomacy, and the competition is ready to stay for years to come. When Japan's Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide visited Biden in April, both sides explicitly deemed China's disruptive behaviors as "inconsistent with the international rules-based order," and emphasized "the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues" in the leaders' statement. The term "China" appeared in this document seven times, including the contexts of the East and South China Seas.

In comparison, with only one mention of "China" while pledging "freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea and beyond," the statement between Biden and Moon intentionally toned down the menace China put forth in the Indo-Pacific region. The statement also forewent the reference to "the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues." Although the target of concern is obvious, what we see is South Korea's adoption of an implicit, pointing "You-Know-Who," instead of names strategy on the China factor. In Moon's visit to Congress, he voiced that "the development of U.S.-China relations is also important to South Korea," and that Seoul will help "maintain the stability of U.S.-China ties on the basis of the South Korea-U.S. alliance." Apparently, South Korea aims to hold a balanced position between its largest trading partner and its most important security ally.

Unsurprisingly, China reacted to the Biden-Moon statement on May 24 with complaints against the U.S. intention in expression, but more specifically on the comment focused on Taiwan (meddling China's "internal affairs"), calling it "playing with fire." On May 25, nevertheless, China exerted its economic influence by stating that South Korean enterprises are welcome to play an important role in strengthening bilateral economic and trade cooperation. In response, South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong expressed South Korea has "refrained from making specific comments about China's internal affairs," and Seoul's one-China policy remains unabated, adding that "the joint statement is not targeted at any specific country."



## **The Road Ahead**

It is no doubt the U.S.-ROK alliance is turning a new page, and the U.S. leadership is back. However, the China challenge is real and no longer an elephant in the room. The Quad is in place, with the U.S.-Japan alliance playing an essential role. Nevertheless, whether South Korea would firmly stand by the allies or become the weakest link in the Indo-Pacific remains in question.

The first issue that might hamper South Korea's efforts allying with the U.S. is North Korea. It is tempting for Moon to leave his legacy of engaging North Korea as an out-going president, which for now seems to be partly in line with the Biden administration's NK policy review. Of course, Moon's relatively low approval rating at home may prevent him from pushing his engagement policy further. However, if North Korea returns to missile and nuclear weaponry tests, it would definitely complicate the U.S.-ROK alliance and the U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral coordination.

How the U.S.-China competition plays out is the other element that would shape South Korea's choice. When we witness South Korea's tiptoeing between the U.S. (and the Quad) and China, it is evident that striking a delicate balance more and more is a difficult task for any government in South Korea. China's truculent behaviors that challenge the rule-based international order are responsible for creating this dilemma to neighboring countries, not only South Korea. That said, South Korea should play a more proactive role in the U.S. blueprint of strengthening the global semiconductor supply chain. Only by shaping the geo-economical and geo-political components in the Indo-Pacific simultaneously as a joint effort, would China realize it should change its behavior for its own good.

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