

Biden, Trump and Moon: Prospects for the US-South Korea Relationship post-2020

Issue 2020/12 • October 2020

by Linde Desmaele

The US extended deterrence guarantee to South Korea is arguably the core of the US-ROK bilateral relationship. Trump's cost-centric approach to alliances and his periodic references to bringing US troops home from Korea have raised questions in Seoul about the credibility of Washington's security commitment. The Trump administration's demands for a four to five-fold increase in Seoul's contribution to United States Forces Korea-related expenses, in particular, have created friction within the alliance. Seoul has offered to increase its annual commitment by up to 13 percent from the 923 million USD it shouldered last year but refuses to bend to US pressure for more, leaving ongoing negotiations on a new cost-sharing formula deadlocked. In response, the Biden campaign has accused Trump of trying to "extort" South Korea and of treating alliances like "protection rackets." In line with his broader plan to restore America's international standing, Biden has emphasised that reinvesting in the US treaty alliances with South Korea, Japan and Australia will be a top priority for his administration. Thus, from Seoul's viewpoint, a Biden presidency is likely to be the preferred option in this regard.

It is true that Moon's determination to reduce tensions with North Korea may make Trump's hints at a potential reduction in US military strength in Korea not too upsetting. The Moon government has been clear about its eagerness to decrease

If South Korea could cast a vote in the US presidential election, who would it support? From President Moon Jae-in's perspective, three issues promise to be particularly relevant for the US-ROK relationship going forward: Credible deterrence against a potential North Korean aggression, the process of inter-Korean reconciliation and the evolution of Sino-American rivalry in East Asia. Attempts to forecast Donald Trump and Joe Biden's respective Korean strategies in too much detail should surely be taken with a grain of salt. But the candidates' track record and campaign rhetoric can still serve as a useful starting point for predicting some of the broader contours in this regard. Overall, a Biden presidency is Seoul's safest bet. Friction will continue between the two countries, and North Korea remains a major wild card. Nonetheless, if Biden wins, expect the Blue House to breathe a sigh of relief.

reliance on the United States with Korea assuming operation control (OPCON) of military operations not only in peace time, but also in case a war breaks out. But this does not mean that it would welcome any sudden US-imposed disruptions in the management of the alliance. Moreover, some members of Moon's own liberal Democratic Party and Korean conservatives surely do not want to see

the United States scaling down its military presence.

Importantly, a strong US-ROK alliance also depends on how Seoul and Washington agree on the engagement of North Korea. Here, a Biden administration may be viewed less welcome by the Moon government. Early in his candidacy, Biden announced that he would not meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-un without preconditions, after previous Trump-Kim meetings failed to produce any tangible progress in denuclearising North Korea. To some extent, Biden's denunciations of Trump's personalised diplomacy with Kim may be about political posturing. But the Biden campaign's heavy focus on "advancing human rights and democracy around the world" will make it hard for a future Biden administration to mend ties with a regime that Biden himself has described as "brutal" and "murderous." To be sure, Biden has been careful not to embrace any renewed version of the Obama-era unsuccessful policy of "strategic patience," which built on the assumption that sanctions would eventually compel North Korea to negotiate. Absent any type of concession to Pyongyang, however, he may well end up with "strategic patience by default." This is likely to put him at odds with the Moon government's efforts to pursue rapprochement with North Korea and its pushes for greater sanctions relief.

In contrast, Trump has quite enthusiastically embraced Moon's outreach to North Korea by holding three meetings, including two summits, with Kim. Trump's remark on 7 August that he "will make deals very quickly" with North Korea if he is reelected can also further bolster Seoul's diplomacy with Pyongyang. A Trump-led US-North Korea diplomatic process, however, is by no means a dream scenario for Moon either. After all, the Trump administration's primary objective is to prevent a nuclear strike on American soil or against American troops and not to advance Moon's inter-Korean agenda. The Trump administration also continues to subscribe to the United States' long-standing position that stipulates that North Korea should first denuclearise

before receiving any economic benefits. The Blue House, in contrast, believes that the only way to get anywhere with Pyongyang is if you strengthen inter-Korean ties first. In this vein, Moon's special advisor Moon Chung-in in May criticised the United States' sanctions policy for getting in the way of Seoul's plan to create a so-called "peace economy."

Beyond the North Korean issue, the US-ROK relationship has come under strain in light of the intensifying rivalry between Washington and Beijing. Despite pressure from Washington, South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha in September rejected the idea of joining a US-led Asia-Pacific alliance against China – the Quad – saying that it is not a good idea to shut out other countries. Relatedly, in June, the South Korean ambassador in Washington even told reporters that he felt pride in Seoul being able to "choose" between the United States and China and not being forced to choose. As long as there is bipartisan support in Washington for a "long-term strategic competition," Seoul's efforts to maintain some form of geopolitical equidistance between the two great powers will remain a cause of friction in the US-ROK relationship going forward. Biden's openness to engage China on global issues like climate change, COVID-19, and arms control, however, may create more flexibility for Seoul in this regard. In addition, Biden's promise to pursue a concerted US effort to renew multilateralism fits well with the Moon administration's own emphasis on multilateral cooperation as a crucial means to assert South Korea's status as a credible middle power in the region.

At the same time, Moon Chung-in noted in May that improved inter-Korean relations will be the best buffer to US-China strategic rivalry on the Korean Peninsula. Rather than considering the fluctuations in inter-Korean relations as symptoms of Sino-American competition, Moon Chung-in views them as regulators. In other words, Seoul views inter-Korean rapprochement as the defining feature of its strategy of geopolitical equidistance

in East Asia. Yet, as described earlier, engagement of North Korea may well be the key issue for which Biden would be problematic for Seoul.

In conclusion, who would Moon rather see in the White House in January 2021? While neither candidate's agenda aligns well with Seoul's views,

a Biden Presidency holds the promise of a return to traditional alliance management and more room of manoeuvre in navigating Sino-American competition. North Korea will remain a thorny issue, irrespective of who makes it to the White House. Taken together, therefore, one can reasonably expect Seoul to keep its fingers crossed for Biden.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Linde Desmaele is a PhD researcher at the KF-VUB Korea Chair and is affiliated with the International Security Cluster of the Institute for European Studies of Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

linde.desmaele@vub.be

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Institute for European Studies
Pleinlaan 5
B-1050 Brussels
T: +32 2 614 80 01
E: info@ies.be
www.ies.be



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