

# The South Korea that Biden encounters

Issue 2020/13 • November 2020

by Dr. Ramon Pacheco Pardo

There is an old saying that Korea is a 'shrimp among whales'. A small power surrounded by greater powers that determine its fate. When it comes to South Korea, this saying is, well, old. Or to be more accurate, it is outdated. For many years, South Korea has been able to implement a more or less autonomous foreign policy. Facing constraints, yes. But also putting South Korean interests first. This has been a long-held dream for successive South Korean policy-makers. It only started to be realised with the end of the Cold War, and only truly became reality over the past decade or two.

Thus, president-elect Joe Biden will be facing a South Korea that is more independent and confident in its foreign policy goals and actions. But it is also a South Korea that sees a strong alliance with the United States as a crucial component of its foreign policy. And it is also a South Korea that has made a decision when it comes to its relationship with China: friendly relations, yes; leaning towards China or even neutrality between Washington and Beijing, certainly not.

To understand these two core aspects of Seoul's foreign policy, it is necessary to understand how South Korea sees itself. A growing number of South Korean policy-makers believe that their country is a regional power on an equal footing to the other middle powers in the region, such as Australia, Indonesia or Japan. As Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha has stated, 'Korea is certainly in a geopolitical position

President Moon Jae-in has welcomed incoming president Joe Biden by reiterating the value of the ROK-US alliance. What kind of South Korea will Biden be facing? For many years, South Korea has been able to implement a more or less autonomous foreign policy. Facing constraints, yes. But also putting South Korean interests first. It is a South Korea that is more independent and confident in its foreign policy goals and sees a strong alliance with the United States as a crucial component of its foreign policy. For many South Korean policy-makers, their country's rise as a regional power – and, increasingly, as a more important player in global affairs – has been facilitated rather than constrained by the ROK-US alliance. It is also a South Korea that will be willing to support US initiatives aimed at checking China's rise – as long as they don't openly challenge Beijing.

that looks like we are caught in a crossfire. But I think you can turn that around and say it's a leverage'. The second part of Foreign Minister Kang's statement underscores the confidence of a regional power that understands that Sino-American rivalry impacts but does not determine South Korean actions.

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Myung-bak's administration that more openly stated that the alliance serves as an enabler of South Korean foreign policy autonomy. But this is a view shared across different administrations, both liberal and conservative.

This explains why President Moon Jae-in has welcomed incoming president Joe Biden by reiterating the value of the ROK-US alliance. Certainly, all US allies and partners have done the same. Dig a bit deeper, however, and Moon's statement lists areas in which Seoul believes that cooperation with Washington strengthens its hand. These include supporting trade multilateralism, fighting against climate change or overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, multilateral cooperation. A cornerstone of South Korean foreign policy.

South Korea will also be willing to support US initiatives aimed at checking China's rise – as long as they don't openly challenge Beijing. The experience with the deployment of THAAD was a wake-up call for Seoul in this respect. The Park Geun-hye administration agreed to allow its deployment, only to be met with a raft of economic sanctions from Beijing. This came as a shock to the Park administration, which had maintained fairly friendly relations with the Xi Jinping administration. After all, THAAD ostensibly targets the North Korean missile threat. But China saw it differently, and acted like great powers often do.

But Seoul was also shocked by the Obama administration's reaction to Beijing's coercion. Or rather, its lack of a reaction. In short, from the Park administration's perspective, Washington essentially abandoned South Korea in the face of China's actions. This is a belief shared by the Moon administration. Indeed, it is widely held across South Korea's foreign policy establishment. Undoubtedly, outgoing president Donald Trump has significantly damaged South Korean perceptions of the reliability of the ROK-US alliance. But the Obama administration's inaction was also detrimental.

This last aspect is sometimes lost in Washington, but it will inform South Korea's approach to the Biden administration. From a South Korean perspective, there was no point in joining an openly anti-China grouping such as the Quad in spite of pressure from the Trump administration to do so. This will carry on to the Biden administration.

On the other hand, South Korea will be more than willing to support US initiatives that act as a check on China's rise but without specifically targeting any country. Seoul has joined Quad Plus meetings convened throughout this year. It has also expressed its interest in joining a G-10 or D-10 that would expand on the obsolete G-7. Likewise, South Korea will support Biden's announced return to multilateralism – which, among others, would rein in Beijing's behaviour. And the ROK Navy will continue to join maritime exercises along with the US, Australia, Japan and other navies.

Which takes us to Seoul's approach towards China. South Korean views of its neighbour hardened significantly as a result of Beijing's response to the announcement of the deployment of THAAD. For South Korean foreign policy elites, this response showed that Beijing's rise was not necessarily going to be peaceful. For the South Korean public opinion, this behaviour amounted to bullying. Polls carried out ever since have shown that large majorities of South Koreans hold negative views of China. Simply put, there is no mainstream constituency in South Korea arguing for the country to adopt a neutral stance between China and the United States. Leaning towards China is simply out of the question.

In fact, the opposite is true. As an increasing number of polls show, growing numbers of South Koreans support the ROK-US alliance because it acts as a check on China – not because it deters North Korea, which for many South Koreans isn't a real threat. Furthermore, South Korea's military build-up, accelerated under the Moon administration, serves to deter North Korea but also China. Most notably,

South Korea has been alarmed by Chinese jet fighters' regular incursions in the Korean Air Defence Identification Zone (KADIZ) and joint manoeuvres with their Russian counterparts, among others.

What is more, South Korea's move to expand its FTA network in Southeast Asia has been partially driven by a push to diversify manufacturing chains away from China. The FTAs signed with Vietnam and, more recently, Indonesia are clear steps in that direction. In a sense, South Korea pioneered more recent discussions in the United States, Europe or Japan about reducing dependence on China as a manufacturing hub.

But this is a far cry from pushing for the isolation of China, which in Seoul is seen as neither realistic nor desirable. In this sense, the Moon government has a similar position to that of most of Europe,

US businesses or the Abe Shinzo administration in power in Japan until recently. It does not believe that economic isolation would be helpful in dealing with Beijing. During the Trump administration, this has entailed South Korea exercising its autonomy. Most notably, by resisting persistent US calls to ban Huawei from the country's 5G network.

In short, the Biden administration will encounter a South Korea displaying autonomous behaviour but which continues to believe that a strong alliance with the United States underpins its interests. It is also a South Korea that shares several of Washington's concerns about China's rise, but which does not believe in the idea of isolating Beijing. In this respect, an autonomous South Korea is an asset because it brings credibility to US initiatives when it does join in – which it will continue to do once Biden takes office and when it suits Seoul's interests.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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