

Views on the Upcoming Moon-Biden Summit from KEI Advisory Board

President Joe Biden and President Moon Jae-in are scheduled to meet in Washington D.C. on May 21. For President Biden, this will be his second summit with a world leader following his meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga on April 16. Ahead of this engagement, KEI reached out to members of its Advisory Council for their views on likely agenda items, desired outcomes, and other observations. These are their unabridged comments in alphabetical order of Advisory Council members.

Brad Babson (Member of the Global Futures Council on the Korean Peninsula, World Economic Forum)

I would like to highlight two potential outcomes of the Biden-Moon Summit. First on North Korea, I expect a strong bilateral endorsement of coordinated pragmatic engagement for peace and denuclearization as well as the announcement of some specific steps to demonstrate this commitment. Such steps might include specific acknowledgement that the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the security equation on the peninsula as well as globally, and measures proposed to advance protection of human health and food security to demonstrate a non-hostile start for a new comprehensive security negotiation process. Announcement of the appointment of a U.S. point person for North Korean engagement would also demonstrate readiness to pursue a practical path forward. Second, I hope that the Summit would also highlight the shared values and commitment to promoting vibrant democracy in a world trending towards authoritarianism, mentioning in particular the crisis in Myanmar and the strong positions taken politically and economically by both countries to support the popular resistance against the military coup. A commitment to coordinate efforts to support democracies under threat in Asia and elsewhere would be a meaningful outcome of Summit and amplify the value of our alliance.

Claude Barfield (Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute)

On trade an excellent deliverable would be for the United States and South Korea to commit to jointly lead on putting together a regional digital trade agreement. For political reasons it would be difficult for the United States to join the CPTPP, but could move forward on digital trade. One very good benefit of this would be to provide a counter to the authoritarian based digital system that China is spreading regionally and globally.

Nicholas Eberstadt (Henry Wendt Chair in Political Economy, American Enterprise Institute):

At their upcoming summit Presidents Joe Biden and Moon Jae-in will celebrate the US-ROK alliance, underscore our two countries' shared values, and emphasize our common international priorities. There is indeed much to celebrate here—that alliance made modern South Korea possible, one of the great success stories of the postwar world.

But there is also reason for concern: for ROK policy and official thinking today, knowingly or otherwise, call into question the very premises upon which that alliance is based.

The contradictions have been evident under progressive administrations in Seoul for decades—from Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy" to Roh Moo-hyun's Sunshine 2.0 and now Moon's variant.

When he returned from his Nobel-winning Pyongyang summit, DJ declared a North-South war was thenceforth “impossible”. An exhilarating claim—but if true, why exactly were U.S. troops to remain in the South?

Under President Roh, Seoul’s security theorists came up with the notion of “balancing” the DPRK and the USA. But why exactly would the government committed to protecting Seoul against destruction agree to being ‘balanced’ against the regime committed to destroying it?

President Moon—Roh’s former chief of staff—is more wary about spelling out his own “balancing” theory than was his doomed predecessor, but he seems to be animated not only by a desire to balance America against the North, but also to ‘hedge’ against America in his China policy.

I believe there is a logic to a US-ROK alliance, one that outlasts the North Korean state. If Seoul does as well, it would be useful for it to spell out more fully during the summit.

John Endicott (President, Woosong University): Eighteen year ago President Roh Moo Hyun in his inaugural address stated: “...in order to bring about a genuine age of Northeast Asia, a structure of peace must first be institutionalized on the Korean Peninsula.” Twelve years before that, work was begun to advance the concept for a nuclear weapons’ free zone in Northeast Asia. Initially, it began with the news in December 1991 that the U.S. had withdrawn its tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea, thus negating U.S. opposition to nuclear free zones in the area. The Georgia Tech research center CISTP under Professor John Endicott began a quest for the creation of a Limited Nuclear Weapons’ Free Zone in the area, first with a five-week meeting of five flag-rank retired officers from South Korea, Russia, Japan, China and the United States. From this intensive conference a document of Agreed Principles was produced and taken to the arms control community of the U.S. in Washington, D.C., Boston, New York and San Francisco. It provided for a zone, a secretariat, suggested nuclear weapons controls and/or limitations, economic incentives for regional participation and an appropriate escape clause. It was a structure to provide a process toward developing trust and peace. The five participants grew to 60 meeting regularly throughout Europe and Asia in plenary sessions attended by official observers. It flourished until 2010 when legacy issues facing the states of Northeast Asia forced a diminished profile. It deserves a second, but official, look. Something Presidents Moon Jae-in and Joe Biden should consider when they meet later this week.

Stephen Haggard (Director of the Korea-Pacific Program, UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy; Non-resident fellow, Korea Economic Institute of America):

Because the nuclear question will continue to preoccupy U.S. policy toward the Korean peninsula, the Moon visit will permit discussion of the recently completed North Korea policy review. Unfortunately, however, there are only so many ways in which the available policy instruments can be put together: sanctions and sanctions relief; maintaining the deterrent; managing the alliance. Moreover, most of them have been tried. I see parallel fallacies on both sides of the issue. Just as those arguing for engagement—including President Moon--make the claim that an additional increment will do the trick, so do those urging more sanctions. Neither of these propositions have fared very well.

Whispers that the North Koreans are [willing to take a meeting](#) are not necessarily good news. I predict North Korea will go into these meetings with a copy of the Singapore declaration in hand, saying “the United States (not Trump) signed this.” How long will it take to clear a reasonable path through that minefield?

Would a partial agreement of some sort—capping output of fissile material, formalizing the pause on testing, something on Yongbyon—be good? Yes. Allowing South Korea to be the source of selective sanctions relief would provide a staunch ally a legacy policy objective. But the most likely outcome of talks is deadlock. The great game is no longer about denuclearization, which is not going to happen unless Beijing decided—unexpectedly—to get serious about the issue. The game is now about alliance management, deterrence and making it costly for North Korea to pursue its current path (and probably in that order). If we are continuing to do those things anyway, talks won’t hurt. But the likelihood they will be meaningful is also pretty low.

Christopher Hill (Distinguished Fellow, Korea Economic Institute of America, former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs):

The upcoming summit between President Moon and President Biden is notable because it comes early in the context of summit meetings that President Biden has hosted and will continue to host as his administration’s priorities unfold. But its real significance lies in the fact that there will be so much to discuss. Coordination on the pandemic will have a prominent place in the summit agenda. So too will be the myriad of issues in the indo-pacific region, including the critical issue of North Korea’s continued nuclear ambitions. No less important will be the consultations on regional peace and security and the future of security architecture for the region. Above all the summit will symbolize the great importance both countries attach to the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Hyun Oh-seok (former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Strategy and Finance, Republic of Korea):

The Republic of Korea should prepare for a lonelier and scarier future. It now finds itself in an increasingly alarming geopolitical environment. Security types like to refer to it as a “shrimp among whales”. With China being increasingly hostile, relations with Japan continue to be disrupted and North Korea is continuing to build up its arsenal. The shifting dynamics of the alliance with America are of particular concern. America will expect ROK to bear more responsibility and develop its capabilities in security. In this context, President Biden has emphasized America’s reengagement with the world. The United States is now trying to revitalize close ties with allies — both in one-to-one relationships and in multilateral institutions —and to recommit to shared goals, values and responsibilities. No country on Earth has a network of alliances like the United States. As for the relationship between the US and ROK, it is not only our one-to-one ties that are valuable. We have to focus on revitalizing relationships between and among our allies. We share a vast range of issues that are critical to our security and prosperity — and to the world’s. We have to strategize together on how to confront shared threats such as North Korea’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. We can stand together to support democratic values, particularly when they are challenged. We must collaborate on new global security issues including climate change,

cybersecurity, health and pandemic. The economic ties that benefit workers and businesses are also important. Our foreign policies should go beyond just nudging our relationship towards its steady state. It is a time to push it up to another level. As President Biden said, we are not just looking to build back; we are looking to build back better.

James A. Kelly (former Assistant Secretary of State, East Asian and Pacific Affairs):

On May 21, the leaders of the U.S. and the R.O.K. will meet for the first time at the Summit level. President Moon Jae-In is in his last presidential year, and President Joe Biden is in his first. That basic reality can signal a balance to such essential allies, yet with some important differences to be bridged. As a “summit,” we know that portraying positive outcomes is the rule. Therefore, frankness inside the Oval Office can take place. The timing – with the Biden policy review of North Korea almost finished – is ideal for both leaders. President Moon can use the day to review his major efforts toward the North, frustrating in many ways but also helpful and historic. And President Biden can list both plans and hopes. He knows that nothing is certain and that no President has ever succeeded regarding the north.

Spencer Kim (Chairman and CEO, CBOL Corporation):

Vaccine Swap: Korea has over 190 million doses on order. Plus vaccine making facilities. Swap US excess vaccines to Korea now so it can get vaccinated as early as possible. Korea and US jointly decide where Korea's excess doses go when they arrive. Korea agrees to subsidize its vaccine makers to expand capacity for world distribution.

Military Vaccinations: USFK immediately offers vaccines to Korean military forces and essential Korean civilian employees of both USFK and ROK MoD. Part of military operational readiness.

A Solution by Treaty: The US and ROK should set up a working group to examine whether a [multi-party Northeast Asian](#) treaty (ratified by all the players, including the US Senate) is the best, and probably only, way to convince Kim Jong Un to denuclearize and create a more stable security architecture.

Kirk Larsen (Associate Professor, Brigham Young University):

The urgency of President Moon’s approach to North Korea—2021 is the “last opportunity” and sentiment that now is the “time to take action”—is unlikely to be mirrored by a Biden Administration who espouses a “calibrated, practical approach” to the DPRK at best. Given the enormous challenges facing any concerted attempt to achieve the stated goal of the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, perhaps it would behoove Presidents Biden and Moon to focus on an issue largely orthogonal: directly and immediately addressing the urgent challenge of providing timely COVID-19 vaccines to the South Korean population (as of early May only 7% of South Koreans have received even one vaccine dose). The two allies could even offer to share vaccines with the DPRK on humanitarian grounds, a possible first step toward the “practical progress” sought by the Biden Administration.

Satu Limaye (Vice President, East West Center):

As Presidents Biden and Moon prepare for their first summit later this month, key pressing matters will monopolize their attention and efforts. Among these issues are shoring up the bilateral alliance, dealing with North Korea, and managing trilateral relations with Japan. Less urgent but critical to the alliance, as well as coordination with other advanced countries and U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific such as Japan and Australia, will be coordination on strategic economic statecraft, especially countering Chinese technology acquisition.

An existing Senior Economic Dialogue between the two countries provides a platform for deepening discussions and coordination on issues such as the protection of high technology, particularly sensitive technology which can advance China's military capabilities. Both the U.S. and Republic of Korea already have been acting on their own to prevent leakage of advanced technology to China. South Korea has been increasingly faced with China's coercive economic measures since 2016 when Beijing sought to derail Seoul's decision to deploy a U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) antimissile battery. More broadly, South Korea seeks to manage China's critical commercial (and foreign policy) importance with growing sectoral competition from China. The new U.S. administration and Congress meanwhile have made technology primacy and protection a focus of their China strategy. The point is that [both Washington and Seoul are each seized with strategic and commercial imperatives](#) to practice strategic economic statecraft in countering Chinese technology acquisition. The May 2021 summit between Presidents Biden and Moon offer an opportunity to launch a new initiative to further coordinate and strengthen these efforts.

Donald Manzullo (Former Member of Congress and Former President, Korea Economic Institute of America):

As President Biden and President Moon prepare for their summit this week, it will be interesting to see how each perceives the role of China and North Korea.

President Moon may have every reason to believe that Biden is "hands off North Korea" as demonstrated by the "strategic patience" theme of the Obama-Biden Administration. Or, he may believe Biden would keep open options, such as South Korean presidents have done, in engaging the North Koreans in some manner, as did President Trump. To be sure, nobody who has resided in the Blue House or the White House has had much success in deterring North Korea from its path to developing a nuclear arsenal. So, jointly what plans do South Korea and the U.S. have to move this issue in North Korea? What differently can each do jointly to influence North Korea?

China is responsible for about a quarter of South Korea's exports and the U.S. for about an eighth, making South Korea economically tied to both countries. But in terms of security, South Korea is inextricably tied to the U.S. for support. So, how does South Korea continue to balance its dependence on both China and the U.S. for trade, while being dependent on U.S. for security? Will Biden see Moon's reticence to join the Quad security alliance as an indication that at times a middle seat is unacceptable? And will Biden encourage Moon to be more open in criticizing China's human rights violations?

Mustafa Mohatarem (Former Chief Economist, General Motors Corporation): Both the U.S. and South Korea have done a great job acquiring vaccines for their own people. I hope that both countries will commit to helping poor countries obtain vaccines quickly and at a reasonable cost.

Tami Overby (McLarty Associates):

President Moon will be the second foreign leader to meet with President Biden at the White House following the successful Biden-Suga summit, signaling the Biden administration's focus on cooperating with allies and partners in Asia. The summit agenda will be led by US-ROK alliance issues, the North Korea issue, and the China Challenge, and include other topics such as ROK-Japan relations, supply chains, digital technology, vaccines, and climate change.

As Biden focuses on alliances and partners in the region, he will likely use this opportunity to improve Japan-ROK relations while seeking Korea's cooperation on the China challenge. China will be a sensitive issue for South Korea, and it is unlikely that we will see the same level of commitment as that of Japan. Meanwhile, President Moon, who is entering his last year of presidency, will seek to advance his peace agenda while trying to secure commitments on vaccine cooperation amid concerns of vaccine shortages.

Fortunately, trade tensions and KORUS renegotiation are not on the agenda of this administration. With Korea's recent announcement of its K-semiconductor strategy and the May 20 summit on chip shortages led by Secretary Raimondo taking place ahead of the Biden-Moon summit, semiconductor cooperation will be a key focus. As leading countries in the global semiconductor and auto industries, and as allies with shared values, semiconductors will be an area ripe for supply chain cooperation in the region. Both countries are also expected to commit to multilateral and bilateral cooperation on climate change and renewable energy.

Suh Jin Kyo (Senior Research Fellow, Korea Institute for International Economic Policy):

I think it is highly unlikely that trade would be a hot issue in the U.S.-ROK summit. Exports of U.S. goods to Korea have been rising from November 2020 and there is no special issue on the implementation of KORUS FTA.

One possible economic issue could be how actively Korean companies participate in a strong alliance on the semiconductor supply chain and other high technology-related areas which Mr. Biden continuously shows a keen interest in.

However, the high-end semiconductor industry, after decades of globalization, has a highly diversified supply chains with a clear division of work. Any attempt to change such a well-established supply chains would be extremely difficult, even if possible.

Therefore, several Korean companies would be going to announce their investment plan to set up factories in the United States in the summit instead of changing their production in the Chinese mainland. The investment clearly helps bolster the U.S. economy by advancing semiconductor manufacturing in the United States. Huge investment in the U.S. also produces more jobs and lowers unemployment rates.

Korea is looking to receive corresponding cooperation from the U.S. in the North Korea issue and vaccine supplies.

Joseph Yun (Former US Special Representative for North Korea Policy):

Discussions on North Korea, China, and Japan are likely to dominate the upcoming U.S.-ROK summit on May 21. Certainly, the official statement, all pre-negotiated days before the meeting, will detail a laundry list of cooperation areas, from science and technology to democracy in Myanmar to respect for international law and the growing people-to-people ties, but the real discussion between the two leaders will most likely be on regional issues. President Moon, while welcoming the Biden Administration's recently concluded North Korea policy review, will want to persuade Biden that more aggressive diplomatic engagement with North Korea is possible, even desirable. On China, Moon will want to make sure Biden understands the costs South Korea is likely to pay if Washington insists Seoul become an active participant in the Quad. President Biden, in turn, will make a strong case for repairing the much damaged relations between South Korea and Japan, the two most important allies in Asia for the United States. The real payoff of these summits is if the two leaders can develop warm personal relations—as President Clinton did with President Kim Dae Jung and President Obama with President Lee Myung Bak—that makes it possible for the leaders to resolve some of the thorniest problems without damaging the close alliance partnership between the U.S. and ROK.