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THE PENINSULA

The Biden Administration and the U.S.-ROK Alliance

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Joseph Biden will be inaugurated on Wednesday, 20 January, bringing the Trump era to an end. Under the 45th president, American alliances faced significant stress from his skepticism of multilateralism and preference for transactional agreements. The U.S.-ROK alliance was no different, with friction arising between Seoul and Washington from time to time. As the Biden administration takes shape, it is urgent that they work to repair the relationship in order to deal with regional instability and other challenges.

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The incoming administration has indicated it wants to rehabilitate American relations which were stressed under four years of "America First. President-elect Biden has already said that his administration would convene a global Summit for Democracy to "renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the Free World."

But unlike other allies, the president-elect has expressly outlined his agenda on the Korean Peninsula. In October of last year, the then candidate submitted an op-ed that was published by the Yonhap news agency. In addition to economic and social issues, he also described his intention to focus on the alliance with Seoul. "I'll stand with South Korea, strengthening our alliance to safeguard peace in East Asia and beyond, rather than extorting Seoul with reckless threats to remove our troops," wrote Biden. He promised: "I'll fight for a better future for all our children and grandchildren. Katchi Kapshida." While the earnestness of the new president is quite clear, there will be several challenges facing him and his team.

The breakdown in relations between Seoul and Tokyo is one area that needs to be addressed. When tensions arise between them, Washington is forced to act as a go between, taking up time and attention that is better focused elsewhere. In some ways, it is not a new problem, as the difficult history between them have made bilateral relations a sensitive topic. But this relationship has hit a nadir and is only set to get worse.

Earlier this month, a South Korean court found in favor of 12 women who were forced into sexual slavery for the Imperial Japanese armed forces during World War II. In its verdict, the court said that "evidence, relevant materials and testimonies show that the victims suffered from extreme, unimaginable mental and physical pain due to the illegal acts by the accused. But no compensation has been made for their suffering," according to Yonhap.

Japanese government officials strongly criticized the decision, pointing to previous agreements reached between Seoul and Tokyo. These include both the 1965 treaty, which normalized relations between Korea and Japan, as well as the 2015 comfort women agreement that was supposed to "finally and irreversibly" resolve the issue. "I strongly urge the South Korean government to correct this violation of international law," Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide said, according to Kyodo.

The Korean side has responded by calling on the Japanese side not to overreact. After a
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call between the Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha with her Japanese counterpart, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a press release that said that they “shared the view that the diplomatic authorities of the two countries will continue close communication regarding pending issues between South Korea and Japan, including this issue,” according to Yonhap.

Besides this dust-up, North Korea remains a significant threat to the alliance. Earlier this month, Chairman Kim Jong-un made remarks at the 8th Party Congress of the Worker's Party of Korea. Quoting state media, the Associated Press reported that he said the U.S. was the “main enemy” of North Korea, and that “whoever takes office in the U.S., its basic nature and hostile policy will never change.” After laying out developments in North Korea's illicit nuclear weapons program, Chairman Kim also said that “key to establishing new relations between (North Korea) and the United States is whether the United States withdraws its hostile policy.”

North Korea is known to engage in provocative behavior whenever there is a new leader in either the U.S. and South Korea, so the Biden administration should expect to hear from Chairman Kim. Experts say that the pandemic may have delayed such actions, as the Pyongyang government is focused on pressing internal issues. And the Voice of America reported that American officials do not see indication such an event is imminent, but “that could change next week,” according to General Robert Abrams of USFK.

With these, and other pressing issues, the incoming administration has its work cut out for them. Recent media reports suggest the government in Seoul is eager to work with their new counterparts in Washington. Speaking to reporters, an official from the Korean foreign ministry was quoted by Yonhap as saying: “Once the Biden government sets sail and takes form, we intend to work closely with them to craft the most effective North Korea policy as soon and swiftly as possible.”

In particular, this official added that they hoped the new administration would help break the impasse in inter-Korean relations. On the campaign trail, the new president harshly criticized President Donald Trump's cordial relations with Chairman Kim. For this reason, it is hard to see Washington join up with the Moon administration's eager approach to meeting with North Korea. But observers in the U.S. say that the new president would be open minded, provided some good signals from North Korea.

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Korea-Japan trilateralism. Officially, South Korea says it wants to repair the relationship, with its new ambassador, Kang Chang-il, telling Yonhap that he will “make every effort to normalize the relationship between the two countries.”

But Seoul might be underestimating Japanese exasperation over what they see as Korea’s undercutting of two major agreements. In light of the recent court decision in South Korea, members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party in Japan have floated the expulsion of the current Korean ambassador, Nam Gwan-pyo. Satō Masahito, the head of the LDP’s foreign affairs sections told reporters after a meeting of the group: “This situation is a grave infringement on Japanese sovereignty. The government must take visible action.”

Bringing together Korean and Japanese leaders should be a goal for the incoming administration. While the collapse of the 2015 deal shows the limits of American deal-making, it would be helpful for all involved to show a sincere desire to focus on more pressing issues. As noted previously on this blog, the president-elect worked to bring together President Park Geun-hye and Prime Minister Abe Shinzō. Hopefully the new president will be able to use his “Biden magic” on the current residents of the Blue House and Kantei.

With these challenges ahead, it is heartening that the Biden administration will have a strong background in foreign policy and diplomacy. In addition to the new president’s own experience, he is quickly putting together a team that has deep roots in the region, from Secretary of State nominee Anthony Blinken to Kurt Campbell as his special Asia policy coordinator. While they will have a lot on their plate, hopefully strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance will receive the attention it needs.

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Return to the Peninsula

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