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THE PENINSULA

Antony Blinken on a Foreign Policy for the American People: Implications for the Two Koreas

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It is the job of every foreign ministry to advance the interests of its country. But how, precisely? Biden's [first foreign policy speech](#) stressed basic principles, and focused in no small measure on democratic values and restoring American presence on the world stage. This focus mirrored themes Biden [raised in his campaign](#), to be sure. But the campaign placed clear priority on domestic challenges and economic fundamentals in its foreign policy approach. Blinken led his first major foreign policy address on March 3 by

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acknowledging the abstractness of many foreign policy issues for most citizens, and that the ultimate goal of foreign policy is “to make your lives more secure, create opportunity for you and your families, and tackle the global crises that are increasingly shaping your futures.”

What do the tea leaves of Blinken’s speech—and the simultaneous release of the Interim Strategic Guidance—suggest for how these potentially competing priorities will be reconciled? What does Biden’s grand strategy look like? And what—if any—are the implications for the two Koreas?

Reconciling Domestic Priorities and Foreign Policy Interests

Lists of priorities do not make for compelling reading, but Blinken’s list of eight foci for the new administration provide important clues to overall direction. Of the eight, five touch directly on economic issues. First on the list is stopping COVID and strengthening global health security, and second is economic recovery, both at home and globally; the pitch for passing the current relief bill is direct. The inclusion of immigration, climate change and technology mean that more than half of the listed priorities are aimed at building underlying capabilities at home.

Yet perhaps the most fundamental and cross-cutting priority on the list is the interest in restoring alliances and partnerships. Setting aside the extremes of Trump’s America First approach, those inclined toward a more unilateral foreign policy posture see multilateralism, and even alliances, as at least a potential source of both costs and entangling risks. The Interim Strategic Guidance, by contrast, spends pages (10-13) scrolling through regional and multilateral initiatives seen as neglected during the Trump administration but yielding potential gains for the United States.

Biden’s emphasis on alliances does not spring from the more idealistic strands of the Wilsonian tradition, however, but from a darker assessment of the international landscape. First, as the Interim Strategic Guidance notes, the distribution of power is shifting rapidly, with China—the final of Blinken’s eight priorities, and the one to which the others appear to build—posing “a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.” Alliances are not a luxury, but “enlightened self-interest.”

The Biden administration does draw on the liberal internationalist tradition in highlighting
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the challenges posed by the spread and deepening of authoritarianism, to be sure. But again, this challenge is not just an ethical one but material as well. Authoritarian regimes “use misinformation, disinformation, and weaponized corruption to exploit perceived weaknesses and sow division within and among free nations, erode existing international rules, and promote alternative models of authoritarian governance.”

Implications for the Two Koreas: The Alliance

The Koreas do not receive sustained attention in either the Biden or Blinken speeches nor in the Interim Strategic Guidance, which should come as no surprise given that a policy review is underway. Yet the focus on alliances also requires attention to the challenges that reviving them will pose, in part because of the very forces that the Biden administration itself has identified.

On the relationship with South Korea, we can count on the fact that the burden-sharing issues will move toward relatively amicable settlement and that source of anxiety will not cloud the future. However, divergence in priorities—particularly given the urgency the Moon administration will feel as its time winds down—should not be underestimated. First and foremost, the Korean administration does not see the same existential challenge from China that the U.S. does. As a result, the question of alliance drift is likely to resurface as voices in Korea revert to language about the importance of “balancing” China and the U.S. in South Korean foreign policy.

This talk could have useful side effects. For example, if the path toward OPCON transfer runs through continued investment in South Korean defense capabilities it could have a silver lining. But the alliance cannot rest on its laurels as a successful experiment in extended deterrence; it is simply not enough.

The Interim Strategic Guidance makes reference—albeit very much in passing—to “modernizing” the alliances, which suggests opportunities for new substantive initiatives.

A natural place to look is the domestic focus on increasing investment in technology and R and D. Technology and R and D are clearly at the core of great power competition, particularly as China has advanced the objective of “military-civilian fusion.” An important report from the [Center for a New American Security](#) has outlined a networked, multi-stakeholder approach among an informal alliance of democracies that would address issues that join strategic and economic interests:

1. To secure and diversify supply chains, establish a semiconductor fab consortium;
2. To protect critical technologies, align export controls for semiconductor manufacturing equipment and strengthen information sharing on Chinese technology transfer;
3. Pool resources to create a multinational investment mechanism for digital infrastructure.
4. Cooperate for the purpose of checking unfair practices in international standard-setting bodies;
5. Establish common norms for the use of surveillance technology.

Whether this list is the right one is secondary; the point is that strengthening the alliance requires a move beyond old pieties and building new ligaments that will sustain it by building common interests going forward.

Implications for the Two Koreas: Dealing with Kim Jong-un

Although everyone is waiting for the completion of the policy review, we actually know more about where the Biden administration is likely to go on North Korea than is thought. Biden made clear in his first foreign policy speech his willingness to engage: “by leading with diplomacy, we must also mean engaging our adversaries and our competitors diplomatically, where it’s in our interest...” And his acceptance of a bottom-up approach will mean a return—if the North Koreans can be induced to show up—to a step-by-step or incremental approach that Stephen Biegun consistently emphasized in his thoughtful comments on the process.

The speed with which the administration has moved with respect to Iran, however, could be read as a signal of where it sees the lower-lying fruit. As daunting as the Iranian problem is, the fact that the country has not openly broken out and the existence of an extant framework make it the easier of the two nuclear challengers to deal with in the short-run.

If this is read by North Korea as neglect, we are in a period of higher risk than may be recognized. North Korea has good reasons not to test in a way that the United States cannot ignore. But we know from the sad history of Obama’s first year in office that North Korea could well miscalculate and choose to take its chances on a more confrontational

One way of mitigating this risk would be to establish a channel as quickly as possible. The long history of U.S. channels is not without controversy. But moving toward a workable bargaining framework is not going to be easy. Signaling the intent to negotiate concretely is

a lot easier than writing down roadmaps that are almost certain to be upset by the realities of actual negotiations.

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Return to the Peninsula