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THE PENIN

## Secretaries Blinken and Austin Make First Overseas Visit to South Korea and Japan

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The first trip abroad by the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense in a new administration are closely watched for clues to the administration's foreign policies. In making the decision which foreign country to visit first, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense separately telegraph foreign and defense policy priorities. The symbolism of that very *first* visit gives an important message. Lawrence Wilkerson, chief of staff to former Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed it this way: "You send signals with your trips, and our allies and friends look at those signals whether we intentionally send it

On March 10, the Department of State announced that Secretary of State Antony Blinken will make his first foreign trip as the nation’s top diplomat to Tokyo and Seoul March 15-18. The trip is particularly noteworthy because this first trip will be a joint one involving not only the Secretary of State, but also Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. It is unprecedented for the Secretaries of State and Defense to make their first visit of the new administration jointly. These two Cabinet secretaries, who focus on international issues, occasionally conduct joint visits, such as when both attend important NATO alliance meetings, but this is the first occasion when the two senior Cabinet officials are making their very *first* trip abroad together.

The Secretary of State has occasionally made a first trip abroad with the President. Colin Powell on his first foreign trip as Secretary of State accompanied President George W. Bush to a meeting with the President and Foreign Minister of Mexico in 2001. And Secretary of State Alexander Haig accompanied President Ronald Reagan on an official state visit to Ottawa in 1981 as guests of the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Canada. Canada and Mexico, as the only countries with land boundaries with the United States, are in a special category for receiving early U.S. senior officials.

Foreign travel in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic—even on U.S. military aircraft—is still dangerous, and the Biden administration has been sensitive about setting a good example and avoiding unnecessary travel. Secretary Blinken held virtual online meetings in late February with his counterparts in Mexico City and Ottawa, and the face-to-face encounters will come later. In view of the heightened dangers of travel during the pandemic, the significance of the joint visits by Secretaries Blinken and Austin are noteworthy.

### **First Foreign Visits by Previous Senior Cabinet Officers**

The first foreign visit by President Trump’s first Secretary of Defense James Mattis was to South Korea followed by Japan. That itinerary conveyed a clear message. Knowledgeable pundits saw the visit to Korea as a “mission to reassure an important American ally.” Foreign policy blunders by Trump during the election raised concerns about the reliability of the United States as an ally under his leadership. Conflicting signals about the importance of Asia to the United States raised doubts. Comments made by Trump suggested that the U.S. could save money if countries like Japan and South Korea

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developed their own nuclear weapons. Also, Trump ended United States participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership, raising questions about his support for continuing international economic cooperation. Mattis' visit to our closest allies in Northeast Asia was an attempt to reassure and bolster those important relationships.

The first foreign visit by Trump's first Secretary of State Rex Tillerson produced a very different and more troubling message. Tillerson's first visit was to Bonn, Germany, for meetings of the Group of 20 foreign ministers, in addition to a multitude of multi-country meetings on a wide variety of topics. His first foreign trip as Secretary gave no clear foreign policy message, which some suggested was in fact a preview of his foreign policy priorities. Furthermore, Tillerson was not particularly well staffed or prepared for the visit. He left for Bonn a month after Trump's inauguration, but only two ambassadors had been nominated and were awaiting Senate confirmation. Most other senior State Department positions were vacant with no nominees even awaiting confirmation. Tillerson named a chief of staff shortly before he left for Germany, but that was after he had been in office for over a month. Tillerson's disorganized debut in international diplomacy continued to echo during his tenure. A month after his trip to Bonn, Tillerson announced he would not attend a NATO foreign ministers conference in April, but the following week he would make a visit to Moscow. The Secretary's travel schedule raised anxious questions about the Trump administration's commitment to the premier U.S. military alliance.

Eight years before Tillerson's appointment as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton carefully and deliberately chose Asia for her first trip as Secretary. She visited Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, and China. In a speech to the Asia Society just a few days before leaving in February 2009, she gave the rationale for making Asia her first foreign destination: "In making my first trip as Secretary of State to Asia, I hope to signal that we need strong partners across the Pacific, just as we need strong partners across the Atlantic. We are, after all, both a transatlantic and a transpacific power. Our relationships with each of the countries I'm visiting, and with all of our partners and allies throughout Asia and the Pacific, are indispensable to our security and prosperity." The policy symbolized by Clinton's first trip as Secretary, variously called the "pivot toward Asia" or "America's Pacific century," marked an important refocus for United States foreign policy. Before Clinton's decision to make her first visit to Asia, most Secretaries of State had made their initial diplomatic foray into Europe.

The key element of the joint visit of Secretaries Blinken and Austin to Tokyo and Seoul is to shore up alliances with key U.S. allies in Northeast Asia. The State Department statement on Secretary Blinken's travel said the visit was "to reaffirm the United States' commitment to strengthening our alliances and to highlight cooperation that promotes peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and around the world." This echoes Blinken's testimony before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives in early March when he called for "revitalizing our ties with allies and partners" because they are "a unique asset to the United States."

When Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's first foreign trip was announced by the Defense Department spokesperson he said that the Secretary's "trip is about working to revitalize our alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region, in particular with Japan and South Korea. . . We want to reenergize our commitment to those treaty alliances."

Helping to set the stage for positive meetings between the foreign and defense ministers of South Korea and the United States was the announcement of an agreement between Seoul and Washington on the sharing of costs for U.S. forces stationed in the South. Seoul announced that it would increase its contributions to host U.S. forces by nearly 14 percent under terms of a six-year "Special Measures Agreement" which replaces the previous agreement that expired in 2019. That amount is slightly more than an earlier proposal rejected by the Trump administration. The initial Trump demand was for Seoul to increase its contribution by five hundred percent so there had been no final agreement between Washington and Seoul.

### **The Lengthening Shadow of China**

The two major issues that have given Northeast Asia priority in Biden administration foreign policy—which are clearly behind the selection of Korea and Japan for the first visits of the U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense—are the increasingly assertive policies of China as well as the growing threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities. The 2 + 2 discussions in Seoul and Tokyo between the two foreign ministers and the two defense ministers will focus on these threats. As the closest democratic neighbors of China and North Korea, South Korea and Japan have as much at stake on these issues as does the United States.

The concern about growing Chinese economic and military influence has been significant,  
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and the apprehension was enhanced by President Trump's unilateral tariffs and other penalties he imposed under his flawed policy in dealing with the China threat. The Biden administration has sought to deal with China by seeking allies and not facing China alone as was the Trump approach.

The Biden Administration is seeking to use the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), an informal grouping involving Japan, Australia, India, and the United States, as a means to strengthen Asian security and balance Chinese assertiveness. Just a month into the Biden administration in February, the four foreign ministers held a virtual Quad meeting at which the leaders agreed that they would oppose Chinese attempts to alter the status quo in Asia and work cooperatively with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and with European powers.

The Quad has some unlikely partners—the U.S. has separate security treaties with Japan and Australia, but India has a long tradition of nonalignment. There are questions about how the Quad might work, but clearly the Chinese threat is raising fears and forcing efforts to deal with the problem. In the upcoming 2 + 2 meeting in Tokyo, issues involving China will be high on the agenda, and the role of the Quad will likely be discussed.

The topic of China will also be central to the 2 + 2 meeting in Seoul. South Korea is not a “member” of the Quad, but South Korea shares the same concerns regarding Chinese influence in Asia. It also has close ties with the other Quad members. South Korean cooperation with the Quad will likely be discussed.

It is significant that Secretary Blinken will go from the meetings with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts to a meeting in Alaska with the senior Chinese foreign policy leadership. He will be joined in Alaska by U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. The range of issues will be significant—trade, intellectual property rights, cybersecurity, climate issues, and human rights. Significantly, Blinken accused China of genocide for its mass detention and sterilization of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang on the same day he announced his meetings with the Chinese in Alaska. The Secretary, however, has called for cooperation with Beijing.

Also significant, Defense Secretary Austin's travel schedule before and after the 2 + 2 meetings in Tokyo and Seoul also highlight the China focus of the trip. On his way to Tokyo, the Defense Secretary will visit the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command headquarters in  
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Hawaii, and after the conclusion of his meetings in Seoul, Austin will visit India, a partner with the United States, Japan and Australia in the Quad.

## **The Continuing North Korea Threat**

Dealing with North Korea will also be a key topic in the 2+2 meeting in Seoul. Although South Korea under the Moon Jae-in administration has sought improved inter-Korean relations, for well over a year little progress has been made. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to tightened border control in the North and serious economic problems. Despite continued South Korean outreach to the North, the response has been hostile. Moon has only one year remaining in his presidential term, and there has been a sense of urgency to make progress on relations with Pyongyang. But the North has been preoccupied with the pandemic and there has been little interest in making progress on North-South relations.

The prospects for progress in U.S. relations with the North also do not look good. Although there were three summits between President Trump and Kim Jong-un, no significant progress was made on denuclearization. Since the failed Hanoi summit in February 2019, meaningful talks of any kind have been stalled. Secretary Blinken told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at his confirmation hearing that the administration would undertake a review of relations with the North, but there has been no indication thus far about where the review currently stands. Clearly, denuclearization is the principal U.S. concern, but there is no indication that the North is willing to make progress.

Secretary Blinken did have a cordial phone conversation with his South Korean counterpart, who assumed office a few days after Blinken was sworn in. If the Biden administration follows the traditional policies toward North Korea (i.e., policies followed by Democratic and Republican presidents other than Trump) there could be some friction between Seoul and Washington over North Korea. During the last two-and-a-half years of his tenure, Trump withdrew the United States from participation in the UN Human Rights Council, and he did not designate a Special Envoy for North Korea human rights. Both the U.S. and South Korea backed away from pressing the North on human rights issues.

It appears now that Washington will play a more active role on human rights issues. The United States rejoined the UN Human Rights Council shortly after Biden was inaugurated. Also, in response to a question during a hearing with the House Foreign Affairs Committee on March 10, 2021, Blinken did say the Biden administration would appoint a Special Envoy

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for North Korea human rights. This could create some friction with the Moon government.

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## Return to the Peninsula