

Conditions for Achieving Strategic Integration between the U.S. and South Korea

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Key Words: Biden administration, ROK-U.S. alliance, strategic integration, North Korea, denuclearization

[ABSTRACT]

This article explores ways to strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance under Biden administration, based on the concept of strategic integration. Strategic integration and disintegration between two countries is determined depending on how the great power's grand strategy and the client ally's military vulnerability are combined. During the Trump administration, the ROK-U.S. alliance experienced strategic disintegration caused by disharmony of their alliance from the U.S. buck-passing strategy and ROK's downplaying the role of alliance. This was particularly related to the U.S.-China relations and North Korean nuclear problem. In contrast, the Biden administration has expressed its willingness to restore and strengthen its alliance network, which is different position from that of Trump administration. On the basis of shared interests and values, the U.S. stresses out the importance of the alliance cooperation. This suggests a possible swift in Americas alliance strategy to direction of balancing. But despite this outlook, to fortify an level of strategic integration in the ROK-U.S. alliance, the U.S. should take much more active interest in North Korea nuclear problem as well as South Korea must pay much more attention to regional diplomatic-security issues beyond the Korean peninsular. This study proposes the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the U.S. and South Korea's position towards it, with the issue of establishing trilateral cooperation between the U.S., South Korea, and Japan, and the North Korean nuclear problem being the three factors that will determine the level of strategic integration of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Given these challenges, the article proposes proactive participation in the U.S.-led liberal international order, preventing risks created by China-ROK relations, and strengthening cooperation with the U.S. on the goal of North Korea's denuclearization as strategic options that the South Korean government needs to consider.

✦ 『국제관계연구』 제26권 제2호(2021년 겨울호).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18031/jip.2021.12.26.2.99>

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I. Introduction

1. Research Background

This article is a study on the strategic integration of the alliance between the U.S. and South Korea. The fundamental purpose of this study is to outline the direction of, and propose methods for, how South Korea should manage and strengthen the alliance given the various diplomatic and security-related issues that the alliance will face during the Biden era. Specifically, this article argues that the role of the ROK-U.S. alliance is more important than ever considering the recent state of affairs on the Korean peninsula including North Korean nuclear issue as well as the U.S-China strategic competition.

Confronted with the challenging factors above, two allies need to urgently strengthen the strategic integration of the alliance in order to protect common diplomatic and security interests. Specifically, this is because both South Korea and the U.S. require the other's cooperation in order to solve their immediate primary foreign policy problems. For example, the U.S. needs to pay greater attention to South Korea's increased national power and geopolitical significance as it engages in strategic competition with China. On the other hand, South Korea needs to promote its position and secure its national interests through the alliance considering how bilateral relations between the U.S. and North Korea holds the key to solving the nuclear problem.

In the next section, the article first reviews the Biden administrations' strategy toward the Korean peninsula focusing on alliance posture with South Korea and North Korea's nuclear issue. Based on this evaluation, the study subsequently explores what kinds of challenging factors are arising from various aspects that two allies are facing,

especially in the position of the U.S. The article concludes by suggesting the positions and strategic responses that South Korea needs to maintain in order to manage the alliance stably and strengthen the strategic integration with the U.S.

2. Theoretical Background

Related to the subject of the possible strategic integration between the U.S. and South Korea, this article concentrates on policy-oriented approaches rather than theoretical research. However, it is useful to define key assumptions and concepts based on existing theories in international relations for establishing the ground of this research.

First, the article assesses the U.S.-South Korea relations as an asymmetric alliance due to how there still remains a considerable gap regarding the relative power of the two allies.¹⁾ Therefore, the article further defines the ROK-U.S. alliance as a form of international cooperation between the U.S. as a great power (patron) and South Korea as a relatively weak power (client).²⁾ Second, strategic integration exists when allies respond to an important security and diplomatic issue confronting both countries with common objectives and strategies in mind.³⁾ On the contrary, strategic disintegration occurs when strategic discord between allies

1) Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 180-189.

2) For studies on strategic interactions between asymmetric alliances, see, John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), pp. 157-165; Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 11-39; Avery Goldstein, "Discounting the Free Ride: Alliances and Security in the Postwar World," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Winter 1995), pp. 39-71.

3) The concept of strategic integration can be usually applied to security and diplomatic issues between ally because it can be determined by diplomatic and security variables as identified in Table 1. In this sense it can be differentiated from the notion of comprehensive strategic alliance in a scope of application.

intensifies in the process of addressing the same problem. In particular, this article applies the argument by Joshua Byun on how the leading power's grand strategy and the ally's military vulnerability determine whether there is strategic integration or disintegration.⁴⁾

Byun explains that leading great powers can either choose between buck-passing or balancing as their strategy in reaction to enemies. Meanwhile, the client ally is motivated to increase its own military capabilities, but this raises the risk of a preventive strike by adversaries in the region. Furthermore, the weaker state might face circumstances that necessitate security cooperation with states in the region other than their great power patron, but their request of security cooperation may be denied when they are weaker than the potential ally due to the state's military vulnerability.

First, buck-passing is intended to pass on the military burden to weaker allies. This strategy has the advantage of minimizing military spending if it succeeds, but entails the opportunity cost of limited influence on the security policies of the weaker ally. This is because a maximum amount of military capabilities and decision-making authority needs to be granted to the weaker state so that it is able to check the adversary. On the other hand, great powers take the lead in addressing threats and thereby shoulder the costs involved when it seeks to balance.⁵⁾ Unlike buck-passing, great powers tend to maximize control over the ally's military capabilities and decision-making when balancing is the strategy. This is precipitated by the need to manage the level of security competition and prevent

4) Joshua Byun, "Determinants of Strategic Integration and Incoherence between Great Powers and Weaker States (in Korean)," *Policy Consultation Paper for the Korea Institute for National Unification* (2020), pp. 1-3.

5) John S. Duffield, "Alliances," in Paul D. Williams (ed.), *Security Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 344-345.

unwanted escalation as the great power decides to take responsibility in defending against their enemy. Byun theorizes strategic integration and disintegration in asymmetric alliances as an interaction between these two factors, as shown in Table 1 below.

<Table 1> Determinants of Strategic Integration and Disintegration in Asymmetric Alliances

		Military Vulnerability of the Weaker Ally	
		Low	High
Great Power's Grand Strategy	Buck-Passing Strategy	Strategic Integration	Strategic Disintegration
	Balancing Strategy	Strategic Disintegration	Strategic Integration

Source: Joshua Byun, "Determinants of Strategic Integration and Incoherence between Great Powers and Weaker States (in Korean)," Policy Consultation Paper for the Korea Institute for National Unification (2020), p. 3.

In addition, Byun argues that when the great powers choose buck-passing, strategic integration occurs with the client ally that is relatively less vulnerable militarily in relation to both nearby adversaries or other potential allies. This is because the strategy of the great power, intended to pass the burden of balancing against the enemy onto the client ally, matches with the efforts of the client ally to maximize its own military capabilities and autonomy. Meanwhile, strategic disintegration occurs between the great power and the client state when the latter is more vulnerable militarily. This is because how the great power's attempt to buck-pass conflicts with the client allies own efforts to avoid either a preventive strike by adversaries or the military expansion of nearby potential allies.

On the other hand, opposite outcomes occur when the great power chooses to balance. Byun suggests that strategic disintegration arises between a great power and the client state when the latter is relatively

less vulnerable militarily. This is because the desire to monopolize military control of the great power clashes with the client ally's efforts to maximize its capabilities and freedom. The relationship between the U.S. and France in the 1960s is a classic example which the client ally adopted excessively aggressive against its adversaries. France chose the bold option of independently pursuing nuclear capabilities despite the opposition by the U.S. because France lacked trust in America's nuclear deterrence of the Soviet Union. On the contrary, there are instances in which the client state's stance is too conciliatory compared to the political and security policies of the great power patron.⁶⁾ The U.S. Johnson Administration's effort to dissuade South Korea government from military retaliating against capturing *USS Pueblo* as well as Blue House raid in 1968 is another example.⁷⁾

Meanwhile, weaker allies that are relatively more vulnerable tend to take a less aggressive military stance against adversarial great powers and seek to rely on the military power of their great power patron as much as possible.⁸⁾ These preferences coincide with the leading state's intent to seize control of the alliance and thus results in strategic integration. Great Britain's appeasement of Nazi Germany immediately before the outbreak of World War II is a good example of this second dynamic.⁹⁾

6) Marc. Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 338.

7) Office of The Historian, "Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State," Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d254> (Accessed November 28, 2021).

8) James D. Morrow, "Arms versus Allies: Trade-offs in the Search for Security," *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Spring 1993), pp. 211-223.

9) Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1990), pp. 137-148.

In this regard, this article takes Byun's assumptions to review the ROK-U.S. alliance and suggest policy considerations to fortify a strategic integration during the Biden administration. First, the Biden administration is currently sublating a buck-passing pursued by the Trump administration and may transform it into balancing. Second, South Korea is not only militarily vulnerable against China and North Korea, both of which possess nuclear weapons, but also remains relatively weaker than Japan. Third, the application of the theory based on the first two points above suggests that the ROK-U.S. alliance experienced strategic disintegration during the Trump era, and it is instead entering a phase during which an enforcement of strategic integration is beneficial and necessary under the Biden administration. Fourth, the U.S. and South Korea therefore need to pursue North Korea policies and regional strategies more actively that would contribute to ally's common interests and values.

II. The Strategy of the Biden Administration

1. Alliance Management

The Biden administration began with the hope that the U.S. and South Korea would have better environments to improve their alliance relations. This was based on the belief that disputes in the alliance that flared during the Trump era would quickly be extinguished, and because it seemed unlikely that 'new' conflicts would deteriorate into 'severe' ones. Such assessments can lead the probable that the Biden administration would regard South Korea's strategic value, compared to the administration that sought to pass on security burden to its allies.¹⁰⁾

It seems clear that the Biden administration will have a more positive perception of South Korea in the areas of diplomacy and security compared to its predecessor. This is because the need for cooperation precipitated by China and North Korea is increasing, and because South Korea has already acquired the capabilities that the U.S. seeks through cooperation.¹¹⁾ In reality, through the first summit meeting between the U.S. and South Korea in Washington DC on May 21, 2021, various agenda requested by the South Korean government were agreed with the U.S. Most of all, it was restated that the value of the ROK-U.S. alliance which would be restored and strengthened in various aspects. In particular, both states agreed to expand the role of alliance and areas of cooperation as well.¹²⁾

As with other past administrations, the Biden administration also considers its alliance policy central to its grand strategy. The main focus of the Biden administration's grand strategy is China.¹³⁾ The role of South Korea in the U.S. strategy toward China and its global diplomatic initiatives has increased compared to the past. Therefore, the level of cooperation that the U.S. demands of South Korea will

10) Academics had already been discussing the ramifications of buck-passing strategies well before the Trump era. John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 4 (July-August 2016), pp. 70-83.

11) Fundamentally, America's list of wishes will likely be determined by whether it considers South Korea to be influential enough to consult on major global and Asia-related issues, or a country that remains limited to Northeast Asia or inter-Korean relations.

12) Sung-han Kim, Du Hyeogn Cha, Hyun-Wook Kim, Sung-Yoon Chung, Beom-chul Shin, Jung-yup Woo, "The 2021 U.S. and South Korea Summit: Assessment and Task (in Korean)," *IIRI Online Series*, No. 88 (2021), pp. 2-19.

13) Here, grand strategy supplements Barry Posen's definition of grand strategy with diplomatic elements. Posen defined grand strategy as a conceptual framework with which states propose military methods to secure the core diplomatic and security objectives that a state defines. Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 12-15.

increase as the foreign policy direction pursued by South Korea and America's global strategy becomes more aligned, and most importantly, as the understanding between the two countries and the range of values shared broadens and deepens.

But there is always the possibility that the Biden administration will grant South Korea a favor or concede on a matter that it deems important to demand active participation by South Korea in an issue related to America's core national interests in return. Specifically, it is possible that the U.S. will ask South Korea to demonstrate progress in terms of its position regarding the Indo-Pacific strategy or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) led by the U.S. in return for either partially accepting, or refraining from, explicitly opposing South Korea's stance on the declaration of the end of the Korean War, the ROK-U.S. joint military exercises, and favorable environments for the resumption of talks with North Korea. These represent challenges that may arise if the Biden administration seeks to manage alliances from the perspective of buck-passing rather than the global and regional balance of power.¹⁴⁾

2. Responding to North Korea's Nuclear Issue

It is expected that the Biden administration will place the North Korean nuclear problem higher on its list of policy priorities and respond more actively than in the past, for two reasons. First, the nuclear threat posed by North Korea on the U.S. mainland has increased.¹⁵⁾ This fact leads the possibility that the U.S. would not

14) The objectives of buck-passing is to transfer the military responsibilities and resource burden to relatively weaker allies.

15) *The New York Times*, "North Korea's Arsenal Has Grown Rapidly. Here's What's in It," October 18, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/north-korea-arsenal-nukes.html> (Accessed October 22, 2021).

consider compellence or compromise to achieve North Korean denuclearization. Second, it is possible that collective thought among advisers within the Biden administration will likely maintain interests on the North Korean nuclear problem at a high level. Secretary of State Tony Blinken, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, and White House Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell are all likely to make efforts to solve North Korean nuclear issues. They have experiences and piled up some lessons when working under previous administrations.¹⁶⁾

It is also expected that the Biden administration will not abandon the concept of CVID (Complete Verifiable Irreversible Denuclearization) in North Korean nuclear issue, regardless of the changes of U.S.-DPRK relations in the future. The Biden administration will actively respond to possible cracks in nuclear nonproliferation regime, and be cautious in sending signals about the endgame to North Korea. From the perspective of policy, the U.S. approach to North Korea, announced in May 2021, reflected its resolve to achieve the complete denuclearization of North Korea through diplomatic methods based on policy coordination with its allies, especially with South Korea.

In this regard, if the current stalemate persists because North Korea continues to enhance its nuclear arsenals with the goal of obtaining the ability to launch preemptive and retaliatory strikes against the U.S. while also strictly maintaining its previous demands for denuclearization, there may be a growing sense within the Biden administration that the threat against the mainland must first be eliminated or reduced at the very least. In such a scenario, the roadmap to denuclearization may become “the rapid and resounding

16) Sung-Yoon Chung, “The North Korea Policy of the Biden Administration and the U.S.-North Korea Relations,” *KINU Online Series*, Co 20-30 (2020), pp. 2-3.

removal of the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons followed by the stable pursuit of denuclearization." Even under these circumstances, however, whether North Korea agrees to and implements "strategically significant measures freezing the nuclear program" will have a significant impact on the trajectory of the North Korean nuclear problem.¹⁷⁾

III. The Challenging Factors to Strategic Integration

1. The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the Biden administration

The Biden administration strongly intends to make Quad the core of its strategy to establish strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region. The U.S. seeks to respond to various challenges within the scope of comprehensive security through Quad, and the coalition of like-minded states that it represents. Global non-traditional security agendas such as maritime security, climate change, cyber security, global health, transnational crime, and the restoration of global supply chains including semiconductors are all issues currently discussed in the Quad. But these various issues cannot be solved by the power of the U.S. alone, nor by the partnership among four Quad member states. Rather, cooperation with states or other actors outside Quad is absolutely necessary to achieve the objectives that Quad pursues and to increase the sustainability of their cooperation.

In this perspective, the U.S. will likely be interested in the prospect

17) Actually, strict monitoring on freezing action also might be much more crucial obstacle to promoting North Korea's Denuclearization issue. Andrew J. Coe and Jane Vaynman, "Why Arms Control is so Rare," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 114, No. 2 (2020), pp. 342-355.

of cooperation with South Korea that not only shares core interests on these major issues but also possesses experience and technological competitiveness. South Korea also may be able to participate actively in the creation of the international regime and substantially contribute through cooperation with Quad rather than merely participating in the process. In other words, a strategic space may open through Quad which South Korea may reflect its interests and values in the creation of international regimes.

But even though the primary role of Quad is directed toward non-traditional security agendas, the main battlefield is the competition over norms between the U.S. and China, specifically the prevention of China's global influence. As China seeks to improve its leadership in diplomacy and security issues based on its considerable growth in economic wealth, all four members of Quad become entangled with China. The consequence will be the hegemonic struggle over global and regional security, military and border conflicts, and maritime security. Therefore, while the Quad would not explicitly and blatantly address only traditional security interests, it is undeniable that China's threats against the survival and core national interests of Quad members will increase both the need for and the possibility of a collective response by Quad.

Most of all, it is possible that the Biden administration will emphasize the strategic flexibility of U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK) through future Global Defense Posture Reviews (GPRs) in order to heighten security stability in East Asia and to prepare for increased military uncertainty raised by China's expansion. In other words, a debate over whether USFK will be deployed in response to security crises either in the Taiwan straits or the South China Sea may be discussed. In terms of policy, the possibility that methods to eliminate causes of conflict in the U.S.-South Korea relationship

regarding the strategic flexibility of USFK will emerge as major tasks cannot be entirely disregarded.

Currently, it is not likely that the Biden administration will redeploy USFK either to the Taiwan straits or the South China Sea. Even if a military conflict occurs in these areas, it will be difficult for the U.S. to decide on redeployment. It is because such decisions as redeployment or relocation could lead negative impacts on diplomatic and political aspects of the alliance. Therefore, they will create more costs than potential military benefits.¹⁸⁾ In addition, the fact that there is considerable opposition against the relocation of USFK in the U.S. congress is another practical reason.¹⁹⁾

2. Security Coalition in Northeast Asia between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan

The Biden administration pursues trilateral security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan as an effective mechanism for its regional interests. Through trilateral security cooperation, the U.S. intends to maintain and strengthen the balance of power and

18) Relocation of USFK may harm America's overall strategic objective of maintaining the status quo in the East Asia region. The US prioritizes deterring and denying China's expansion and the threats that it poses. Therefore, the US cautions against the possibility that unnecessary reinforcements of troops and the relocation of USFK will heighten tensions in the region and precipitate miscalculations by China. The fact that changes to the force posture of USFK may cause a security crisis on the Korean peninsula is another reason. Robert D. Blackwill and Thomas Wright, "The End of World Order and American Foreign Policy," Council Special Report No. 86, Council on Foreign Relations, May 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/report/end-world-order-and-american-foreign-policy> (Accessed November 19, 2021).

19) In June 2021, six representatives from the US House of Representatives, including Congressman Mike Gallagher from the Republican Party and Congressman Andy Kim from the Democratic Party, reintroduced 'The United States and Republic of Korea Alliance Support Act.' This bill prohibits the US government from spending the budget for the 2022 fiscal year beginning in October of 2021 if the size of USFK is reduced below 22,000 troops.

America's influence in the region by preventing China's military expansion in East Asia and deterring military provocations by North Korea emboldened by its nuclear capabilities. In other words, the Biden administration believes that an effective response to China's anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) strategy can be achieved by strengthening the ability to control space through the formidable combined naval and air power of South Korea, the U.S., and Japan, as well as their geopolitical advantages. Moreover, it is expected that the strategic coalition between these three countries will weaken North Korea's blind faith in its nuclear capabilities in the long-term by limiting North Korea's diplomatic options while, at the same time, reinforcing the system of responding to military provocation when crises do indeed occur.

The Biden administration has considerable resolve and hopes for trilateral cooperation with South Korea and Japan. The U.S. has maintained the "principle of the relevant parties solving the problem by themselves" whenever relations between South Korea and Japan have deteriorated. But it is expected that the Biden administration will more actively seek to moderate bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan compared to previous administrations. This is to ensure that the relationship is not harmed further to the extent that trilateral cooperation no longer becomes viable, and to defend against the negative impacts of contentious rivalry on America's security and economy.

Therefore, the Biden administration will, at a minimum, strive to prevent trade and historical disputes between South Korea and Japan from harming the trilateral diplomatic and security coalition between the U.S. and its two allies in the region. As an example of such efforts, the Biden administration may likely resurrect the trilateral Vice Foreign Ministerial Consultation group between the

three countries that were held in 2015 for two years. The trilateral Vice Foreign Ministerial Meeting, held in the Summer of 2021 marked the beginning of such attempts. But similar to past administrations, the Biden administration will refrain from trying to moderate on matters at the heart of the dispute between South Korea and Japan, nor will it be able to do so.

3. Denuclearization of North Korea

In May 2021, the Biden administration announced its policies on North Korea within four months following its inauguration. Compared to previous administrations, this was a relatively quick determination of the directionality of the administration's North Korea policy. The Biden administration announced its resolve to pursue a diplomatic solution on the North Korean nuclear problem through a "calibrated and practical approach." This may be interpreted as the U.S. revealing its intent to generously consider step-by-step agreements and active engagement with North Korea in order to achieve the goal of denuclearization.

The stated approach of the Biden administration on North Korea, as well as statements by the president and his advisers, reveal that Washington is carefully and objectively applying the lessons from U.S.-DPRK relations observed during the previous Obama and Trump administrations. For instance, the Biden administration has stressed that it would neither pursue a grand bargain with North Korea sought by the Trump administration nor implement the strategy of strategic patience adopted by the Obama administration.

It appears that key officials within the Biden administration is crafting North Korea policy based on a mix of hope for cooperation with North Korea, mistrust of failed and dictatorial states, and

animosity as a result of the nuclear threat. Therefore, they currently believe that while diplomacy with North Korea may not be impossible, it may be insufficient. They also criticize the Trump administration's approach for deviating from the traditions of U.S. foreign policy by offering excessive and inappropriate concessions without achieving much in terms of the denuclearization of North Korea in return.²⁰⁾ Moreover, these officials share the perception that the only way to confirm North Korea's sincerity on denuclearization is through the implementation of "strategically meaningful" measures towards denuclearization by North Korea.²¹⁾

By reflecting on the perceptions of these officials, the Biden administration considers strategic flexibility across the strategies of deterrence, diplomacy, and coercion. This implies the pursuit of substantial achievements through appropriate diplomacy and coercion based on firm deterrence, an approach that the Biden administration has defined as the "practical method." The reason the Biden administration has firmly maintained sanctions on North Korea and has refused to offer concessions to incentivize North Korea's return to negotiations despite its emphasis on diplomacy is because it has concluded that such coercive measures are useful for diplomacy with North Korea.²²⁾

20) The assessment of the Trump administration's North Korea policies by relevant officials within the Biden administration can be summarized as follows; first, it recognized the North Korean regime by prematurely agreeing to summit meetings; second, it increased North Korea's value by over-estimating measures and decisions by North Korea; third, it effectively ignored the enhancement of North Korea's nuclear capabilities by fixating on meaningless negotiations.

21) For example, while North Korea claims that the closure of nuclear testing sites and the suspension of nuclear tests are important steps towards denuclearization, the U.S. believes that North Korea is trying to oversell aspects of its nuclear weapons program that it no longer needs because it has already acquired and verified nuclear warhead technology with its fourth through sixth nuclear tests.

22) Sung-Yoon Chung, "The Characteristics and Outlook of the Competition of Strategy between North Korea and the U.S.," *KINU Online Series*, Co 21-21 (2021), pp. 1-3.

But considering these aspects and characteristics of the Biden administration's stance towards North Korea, it is difficult to conclude that strategic cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea on the alliance's strategy regarding denuclearization of North Korea will proceed smoothly. The most gravest dispute between the two allies can be expected to occur if and when South Korea attempts to influence U.S.-North Korea relations through inter-Korean relations. North Korea will favor this approach and will actually entice the Moon administration. But even if such a situation develops, North Korea will likely benefit little from that situation, because it is hardly possible that the U.S. will accept this exchange. The most likely area in which this will occur will be on the matter of sanctions on North Korea.

Under such circumstances, the Biden administration may not consider much about cooperation with the Moon administration on North Korean policy. If the Biden administration displays greater openness towards South Korea's position of "pursuing and gradually implementing a comprehensive agreement", coordination between the two allies may be hoped to increase because restarting negotiations on the denuclearization of North Korea is in the clear and important interests of South Korea.

IV. Conditions for ROK-U.S. Strategic Integration

1. Cultivating an Environment for the Reinforcement of Strategic Integration

The academic community is in agreement that liberal multilateralism led by the U.S. is the defining feature of the current international

system.²³⁾ As many countries in the international community either cooperate or comply with this system, states that challenge this liberal multilateral order are defined as revisionist states. From this perspective, while there are several claims that are concerned about the possibility of China aiming to revise the U.S.-led liberal international order, there are also strong voices that contend that China will continue cooperating with the existing system as well.²⁴⁾

Given the current strategic situation facing South Korea, it is realistically impossible for South Korea to adopt a national strategy that counters the international order led by the U.S. Even without considering the factor of the U.S., the future on the Korean peninsula proposed by South Korea to the international community through the Korean Peninsula Peace Process will not be able to contradict the principles of liberal multilateralism. This is because cooperation with, and support from, the international community is essential not only for the Korean Peninsula Peace Process but also to secure the sustainability of cooperation.

Under such circumstances, the question that South Korea will face is how it will shape its policies towards the U.S. in an environment in which China is seeking to increase its influence and strengthen its leadership within the multilateral international order led by the U.S. Recent South Korean governments, both conservative and liberal, have enhanced the strategic cooperative relationship with China considering the unique economic mutual interdependence between the two countries. In particular, South Korea has adopted the strategy of negative hedging by trying not to step on China's

23) G. John Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, "Hegemonic Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders," *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2019), pp. 395-421.

24) G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018), pp. 7-23.

diplomatic and security interests due to China's influence on the North Korean nuclear problem and the pursuit of the Korean Peninsula Peace Process.

However, South Korea is now at a critical juncture. It needs to decide on which international order is beneficial to comply with. It is clear that the Biden administration has made steps to reshape the liberal multilateral order including its strategic goal checking China, and China opposes this U.S. movement. In other words, South Korea now faces a crossroad in which it needs to choose which strategic position is the most realistic and likely to aid the promotion of its national interests within the liberal multilateral order at a time when several policies are being pursued simultaneously, including the strengthening of strategic integration with the U.S., improving relations with North Korea, attempting to facilitate better U.S.-DPRK relations, and persuading the support of neighboring great powers in the region.

In order to restart the Peace Process that has stalled in 2021, the Moon administration has chosen to productively contribute to the U.S.-led international order. In other words, it appears that while South Korea has more enthusiastically responded to demands for international cooperation requested by the U.S., it has also reached the decision to either more actively convey its intentions or that it should even sometimes adopt stances that counters the U.S. when it is deemed to help the promotion of the Korean Peninsula Peace Process.²⁵⁾ It appears that the reason why the Moon administration

25) There were reports that the reason why South Korea's Minister of Foreign Affairs made comments that could easily misinterpreted by the US during a visit to Washington in August 2021 was that it was a bold strategic maneuver to actively induce cooperation from China. *Hankook Ilbo*, "The Controversy of the Foreign Minister's Comments implying China's Aggressive Foreign Policy as 'natural' (in Korean)," September 24, 2021, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2021092316370005312?dtype=1&dtypecode=f73e5228-9f2d-4a5a-8212-14d8f5c81f5a&did=DA&prnewsid=A20210924>

chose to strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance in ways that counters the strategic interests of China at the summit meeting was influenced by its consideration of ways to overcome such limitations and problems.²⁶⁾

2. Managing Challenges in South Korea-China Relations

The cooperative relationship between South Korea and China, in particular trade relations, tends to flourish when there are fewer security concerns. Therefore, when considering the realities of South Korea's high economic dependence on China and the importance of trade with China on South Korea's national power, efforts to reduce diplomatic and security disputes with China can be viewed as a natural tendency of South Korea's foreign policy.²⁷⁾ The question is which strategic position is the most beneficial when the process of pursuing national interests by several important countries are mutually exclusive. This, in other words, refers to the issue of the order of preferences between the economic benefits gained through foreign trade with China and security-related benefits obtained through diplomatic and military cooperation with the U.S.

As a consequence, the situation is one in which South Korea is

07350002967 (Accessed October 21, 2021).

26) The balanced diplomacy that the Moon administration implemented over the past four years was limited in achieving positive accomplishments due to the structural factor of intensifying competition between the US and China and the practical cause of South Korea's relatively weak national power. In particular, it can be assessed that the strategy also backfired once the South Korea-US and South Korea-China relations turned into a zero-sum due to South Korea's strategic positioning, resulting in the inability to secure the trust of either great power.

27) Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Summer 2019), pp. 46-69.

unable to choose the most preferred reward in any of the two games that it is engaged in with the great powers from the beginning. Therefore, South Korea must consider the prioritization of more important preferences and the appropriate pursuit of its rewards accordingly from the viewpoint of pursuing the Korean Peninsula Peace Process. This does not imply that the balanced approach is wrong, but rather it shows that South Korea must accept the reality that it is close to impossible for the balanced approach to obtain the maximum amount of gains from both games with great powers simultaneously.

By considering these limitations and revisiting lessons from theory, South Korea needs to consider the following three aspects regarding its management of South Korea-China relations. First, South Korea must consistently convey a clear position on its national interests to China.²⁸⁾ Ensuring that China does not have false expectations about South Korea and making sure that bilateral relations remains free from overestimation will eventually be beneficial for the future of relations between the two countries. Maintaining an ambiguous stance towards other countries can sometimes obstruct the rational calculations of others. Moreover, policies preceding from ambiguous positions that counter the expectations of others may result in the loss of diplomatic face and precipitate severe retaliation by opposing states.²⁹⁾

28) Victor Cha, "No Space to Hedge: US-China Competition and Its Impact on Korea," in Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein (ed.), *After Engagement: Dilemmas in U.S.-China Security Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), pp. 216-243.

29) South Korea must be wary of provoking serious conflicts with China due to economic reasons. However, by applying James Fearon's theoretical explanations, South Korea's cooperation with China is fundamentally limited due to the fact that strengthening the military is also inevitable given the anarchic nature of the international system and China's geographic proximity. James D. Fearon, "Cooperation, Conflict, and the Costs of Anarchy," *International Organization*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (2018), pp. 552-559.

Second, attention needs to be paid to the expansion and deepening of joint interests with China. In particular, China is in desperate need of sustained growth in power and the establishment of a stable international environment. Therefore, South Korea will be able to at least prevent deterioration of its relationship with China even if the strategic competition between the U.S. and China intensifies if it is able to actively promote a cooperative relationship with China on issues that are peripheral to the great power competition while also able to alleviate China's concerns about the destabilization of affairs on the Korean peninsula.

Third, South Korea also needs to attempt to reduce its level of economic dependence on China as a mid- to long-term strategy in order to achieve the three goals of maintaining mutually friendly relations with China, reducing the diplomatic and security pressure of China on South Korea, and increasing South Korea's foreign policy autonomy. In particular, a sudden increase in economic interdependence may result in China's increasing interference in South Korea's diplomacy. This situation will negatively impact South Korea's freedom as it pursues the Korean Peninsula Peace Process. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen strategic interest and engagement in India and ASEAN.

3. Policy Coordination on North Korea

The structural characteristic of the situation that has continued since the failed Hanoi U.S.-North Korea summit in 2018 is that U.S.-North Korea relations has functioned as the independent variable for inter-Korean relations as well as the necessary and sufficient condition for the Korean peninsula. This implies that South Korea's strategic space in the process of pursuing denuclearization

has structurally decreased. It is a considerable option to have the U.S.-North Korea bilateral approaches in dealing with denuclearization and its related foreseeable future. Additionally, there are two suggestions for South Korea to reflect its strategic interests and strengthen its initiative of denuclearization of North Korea.

First, South Korea needs to prepare for a denuclearization strategy based on the recognition that both U.S.-South Korea and U.S.-North Korea relations will be harmed if Seoul becomes too focused on inter-Korean relations. By reviewing the past three years of the Korean Peninsula Peace Process, it emerges that while North Korea has strategically manipulated South Korea to impact its relationship with the U.S. and shape the situation in its favor, South Korea has tended to excessively depend on the effect of North Korea policy based on good will,³⁰⁾ such as mutual military agreement in 2018 between North and South Korea.³¹⁾

In addition, North Korea will likely pursue to influence the Korean peninsula policies of the Biden administration through South Korea, actively pursuing a wedge strategy based on the perception of inter-Korean relations as the weak link that will be able to induce cracks in the ROK-U.S. alliance and its trilateral coalition with Japan. This outcome may result in the opposite of the South Korean government's principle of promoting the Korean Peninsula Peace Process by increasing South Korea's initiative.

30) Sung-Yoon Chung, "The Causes of North Korea's Coercion Strategy," *The Korean Journal of Security Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2020), pp. 3-5.

31) States face difficulties in cooperating on arms control because they are unable to accurately assess the efforts by others to increase military power and the risk of being betrayed constantly exists. In particular, recent studies that have discussed how cooperation on arms control is rare due to the difficulties of ensuring both the transparency of inspections and actual conditions for peace are partially applicable to the situation on the Korean peninsula. Andrew J. Coe and Jane Vaynman (2020), pp. 349-355.

Second, strategic integration between the U.S. and South Korea needs to be increased on the specific issue of North Korea's denuclearization. The matters that the two governments need to immediately coordinate policy are the strategic value of sanctions on North Korea and how to jointly manage these sanctions. The U.S. and South Korea actively utilized sanctions as punishment for provocations and as mechanisms to compel dialogue until late 2017. The two allies were able to increase the level of coordination especially on issues regarding North Korean provocations, the threat of North Korea, and ways to bring North Korea to the negotiation table.

But since 2018, the South Korean government has approached the issue of sanctions separately, with Seoul considering it as a tool to induce voluntary cooperation by North Korea and the U.S. as a backup plan against the risk of deception and cheating by North Korea. There even occurred an instance in which the ruling Democratic Party of Korea sided with North Korea instead of the U.S. in response to complaints by North Korea over the ROK-U.S. working group. Particularly since 2020, the two governments have been unable to demonstrate a shared perception of the situation involving North Korea's provocations intended to increase its nuclear capabilities including its launch of ballistic missiles, resulting in divergent assessments of the current strategic environment.

In order to proactively respond to these challenges to the strategic integration between South Korea and the U.S., the priority of the South Korean government needs to be reaching agreements with its allies on a joint strategic perception and how to operationalize strategy. Such efforts lie at the core of strategic integration intended to deter provocations and increases to its nuclear capacity by North Korea, and also to induce either voluntary or involuntary cooperation. Moreover, it is expected that strengthening strategic integration will

help cultivate a strategic environment in which South Korea's national interests are further reflected in bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea, and South Korea's bargaining power will be strengthened in the process of resuming inter-Korean cooperation.

V. Conclusion

This study analyzes the characteristics of the Biden administration's Korean peninsula policy through its management of alliances and approach towards the North Korean nuclear problem. It seems clear that the Biden administration will have a more enthusiastic and positive perception of South Korea in the areas of diplomacy and security compared to Trump administration. It seems likely that the Biden administration may adopt not a buck-passing strategy but a balancing strategy toward its ally's common interests and values compared, unlike its predecessor. Such a possible swift of the Biden administration's alliance strategy can be beneficial to promote strategic integration between the ROK-U.S. alliance.

However, it is still possible not to accomplish the strategic integration between the U.S. and South Korea, because only the U.S. pursuit through its diplomatic strategy is not enough condition for reinforcing ally's strategic integration. Most of all, a possible enhancing the level of the ROK-U.S. alliance's strategic integration can be determined to the extend of how two allies cooperate on shared national interests and values concerning vital alliance issues. This study identified the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, trilateral security coalition in Northeast Asia among South Korea, the U.S., and Japan, and the North Korean nuclear problem as the main

challenges that the two allies are likely to face. This study also argues that strategic integration between the U.S. and South Korea needs to be strengthened on these matters.

This study insists that the strengthening of strategic integration in particular, is urgently required to achieve substantial progress in the denuclearization of North Korea, and argues that the South Korean government needs to both harmonize with the U.S. regional strategy and establish a new strategic relationship with China. Simultaneously, much more attention of the U.S. should be paid to North Korea nuclear matter to facilitate a strategic integration. Increasing strategic disputes between the two allies will inevitably exert negatively the priorities of the two countries; the solution of the North Korean problem for South Korea, and the management of the strategic competition against China for the U.S. Beyond the shared values jointly pursued by the alliance over the past 20 years, a situation has now arrived in which both allies urgently need the assistance of their ally on their most pressing concerns.

Above all, it is necessary for South Korea to solve the North Korean nuclear problem through the ROK-U.S. alliance given how true peace and stability on the Korean peninsula cannot be obtained without a solution to the nuclear problem, and the reality that the issue is becoming structurally centered around U.S.-DPRK relations. Therefore, South Korea needs to actively participate in the liberal international order led by the U.S. and, in return, confidently request a firm degree of extended deterrence. Meanwhile, the U.S. needs to make efforts to ensure that the national interests of South Korea are reflected in U.S.-North Korea relations as if they were their own.

Since the inauguration of the Biden administration, it has become unrealistic to craft policies based on the perception that inter-Korean relations will function as the independent variable for the

Korean Peninsula Peace Process and for the solution of the North Korean nuclear problem. This is because the structural influence of U.S.-DPRK relations is too great in comparison, because the U.S. does not wish for this outcome, and lastly because North Korea considers inter-Korean relations as a way to weaken the ROK-U.S. alliance as well as South Korea's bargaining power without much regard for the relationship itself. Therefore, the realistic policies that South Korea can choose during the Biden era will be to expand its influence on U.S.-North Korea relations through the U.S.-South Korea alliance and manage inter-Korean relations. The main argument of this study is that South Korea needs to strategically integrate with the U.S. more actively on a variety of challenges confronting the alliance compared to the past in order to achieve these goals.

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[국문초록]

한·미 전략적 통합을 위한 조건

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본 글은 바이든 시대 한·미동맹의 강화 방안에 관한 연구이다. 본 연구에서는 비대칭 동맹국 간 관계의 특징으로 전략적 통합과 분열을 제시한다. 동맹 간 전략적 통합과 분열의 가능성은 강대 동맹국의 대외전략과 약소 동맹국의 안보취약성에 영향을 받는다. 트럼프 행정부 시기 한·미동맹은 분열의 성격이 강했다. 트럼프 행정부가 동맹에 대한 책임전가 전략을 채택했고, 한국이 동맹 친화적인 대외전략을 경시했기 때문이다. 이러한 전략적 분열은 양국의 사활적 이익과 결부된 미·중관계와 북핵문제에서 두드러졌다. 하지만 바이든 행정부는 취임 초부터 동맹 복원을 강조하였다. 즉 동맹국과의 공통 이익과 가치를 기반으로 협력관계를 강화하겠다는 의지를 밝혔다. 따라서 향후 바이든 행정부가 전임 행정부의 책임전가 전략을 계승하지 않을 가능성이 높다. 이는 미국의 대외전략의 근간인 동맹전략의 전환 가능성을 시사한다. 하지만 미국의 동맹전략 전환 가능성과는 별개로, 한·미동맹이 전략적 통합 수준을 높이기 위해서는 미국은 북핵문제에 그리고 한국은 지역 현안에 좀 더 적극적인 관심을 가져야만 한다. 이러한 취지를 고려해 본 연구는 향후 한·미동맹의 전략적 통합 수준을 결정할 요소로 미국의 인도-태평양 전략과 한국의 선택, 한·미·일 3국 안보협력 구축 문제, 북핵문제에 대한 미국의 적극성 정도 등을 제시하였다. 그리고 이 세 가지 도전 요소에 직면해 한국 정부가 고려할 수 있는 전략적 고려사항으로 미국의 자유주의적 국제질서에 대한 능동적 대응, 한·중관계의 위협요인 억제, 북한 비핵화를 위한 한·미공조 강화를 주장한다.

주제어: 바이든 행정부, 동맹, 전략통합, 북한, 비핵화

투 고 일: 2021. 10. 26

심 사 일: 2021. 11. 08

게재확정일: 2021. 11. 16