



Series: America's Choice in 2020

⑤ The U.S.-China Relations

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Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden officially declared victory as the 46th President of the United States via national speech on November 7, 2020. President-elect Biden, who won after a fierce battle with President Trump, emphasized cooperation and hope and suggested a new possibility of change by stressing that “I will make the United States respected by the world again.” This year’s U.S. Presidential election did not show much of a “China bashing” than the last election due to COVID-19. However, if the Biden administration soon initiates its policy against China, it seems likely that the U.S.-China relations will consist of a mixture of containment and engagement measures, and thus will be formed through a “conengagement” policy, which is a different strategy from that of the Trump administration.

The foreign policies proposed by the Biden camp well reflect the Democratic Party’s traditional agenda of the past, and above all, highlight the recovery of the collapsed U.S. global leadership. It aims to restore the core U.S. values of democracy and alliance, maintain pressure against China as well as selective interventionism, and re-establish the country’s position as the global leader. In such context, it is highly likely that the upcoming Biden administration will prioritize deterring China’s rise through military and diplomatic measures, share the burden with its allies by strengthening ties, and at the same time, push China with international norms and multilateral cooperation. In fact, Biden have already clarified his position through an article in Foreign Affairs in March 2020, saying that the U.S. needs to maintain firm position against China, and if China keeps doing whatever it wants (e.g. continuing to shake off technology and intellectual property rights of the U.S. companies), the U.S. shall respond by forming joint partnership with its allies in fighting against China.

Currently, there has been a bipartisan agreement on the U.S. policy towards China that engagement strategies conducted in the last 40 years have not transformed China to adopt a more open political system, to comply in the liberal international order, nor to accept the rule of law and other democratic values, but rather have helped China to grow its strength in becoming a strategic rival of the U.S. Thus, it is expected that there will be no change in the importance of Indo-Pacific strategy as highlighted by the Trump administration. Rather, new changes are expected in the details such as rhetoric and approaches. That is, instead of pressuring China directly as in the Trump administration, the Biden administration is likely to carry out multilateral strategies through strong cooperation and solidarity among its allies. Also, there is a high possibility that the Biden administration will return to international agreements, which the Trump administration have withdrawn, and contain China by utilizing international organizations in close partnership with its allies. In particular, as the Democrats have always valued democracy, human rights, and freedom, it is highly likely that the Biden administration will proceed new pressure tactics towards China with value-related issues, such as Hong Kong Security Law, human rights issues of Xinjiang Uyghur (新疆) and Xizang Tibet (西藏), and Taiwan Relations Act along with the support of allies and friendly countries.

In line with Biden's victory, China has also set the nation's target to overcome full-scale conflicts and challenges with the U.S., and began its journey in achieving the two centenary goals (兩個一百年) of becoming the powerful socialist state and fulfilling the China Dream (中國夢) by 2049 under the one-man system of Xi Jinping (習近平). In President Xi's speech at the 75th anniversary of victory against Japan held at the Great Hall of the People on September 3, 2020, Xi publicly declared his strong will to not give in against the U.S. aggression. He strongly criticized a new approach of the U.S. to China and firmly stated, "We will never tolerate any attempts by anyone or any force that distorts the history of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and divides its people." Moreover, on October 23, at the massive event celebrating the anniversary of the Korean War in which all the Politburo Standing Committee members have joined in 20 years after former President Jiang Zemin (江澤民) in 2000, President Xi declared, "We will not sit by and watch the damage of our nation's sovereignty, security and development interests, nor will we tolerate any force invade and divide our sacred territory. In the event of such invasion and intervention, the Chinese people will fight back without hesitation." The speed of strategic competition and rivalry between the U.S. and China surrounding issues such as Taiwan and South China Sea is expected to accelerate, considering that China has no interest in giving up its core interests even after the inauguration of Biden.

China does not want extreme confrontation and conflict with the U.S. Nevertheless, tensions will rise even after the Biden administration, unless the U.S. accepts core

values and ideas of the CPC and understands the importance of China's core interests as China firmly stands against the U.S. Furthermore, President Xi is currently focusing on revitalizing domestic economy and restoring the party-state system that have been damaged due to the COVID-19 through promoting anti-poverty campaigns and visiting Shenzhen (深圳) as a part of the second southern tour (南巡講話). At the same time, the Xi leadership is stressing socialism and patriotism, and provoking the Chinese nationalist sentiment to build an internal solidarity by effectively counter-using hostile pressuring policies of the U.S. towards China. Also, as the strategic rivalry between U.S. and China has heightened and the COVID-19 has prolonged, at the fifth plenary session of the 19th Central Committee of the CPC, which lasted for four days from October 26 to 29, 2020, the Xi leadership has declared "Dual Circulation (雙循環)"¹⁾ as the new national development strategy, emphasizing the growth of domestic economy instead of conventional reliance on export. In addition, against the U.S. sanctions imposed on Huawei (華為), China proposed a "strong self-reliance strategy for science and technology (科技自立自強)," which means that China will no longer rely on the West to obtain key technologies and rather independently resolve problems through self-development and innovation. Lastly, through the "Working Ordinance of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China," the Party has strengthened its ruling authority centered on a single General Secretary, Xi Jinping, in preparation for the upcoming U.S.-China strategic competition.

Meanwhile, although the strategic competition between the U.S. and China is likely to continue, the Biden administration is still in the midst of recovering from the COVID-19 crisis and election aftermath, including a deep division within the U.S. society. Thus, it is deemed likely that the new administration will choose to intensify its leverage by partnering with its allies to alleviate the burden and step away from direct confrontations. As China is also facing internal and external threats and difficulties due to the COVID-19, there is still a possibility that China will actively seek to restore a communication channel for the strategic partnership with U.S. as in the former Obama administration, while avoiding extreme conflict and rivalry. Therefore, in contrast to the Trump administration, it is likely that the U.S.-China competition will heighten in areas of trade, technology, commerce and human rights, while competition will alleviate in critical areas of military and territorial conflicts such as the Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South China Sea issues.

At the moment, South Korea is living an unprecedented time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the U.S.-China rivalry. Once Biden takes office, chances are high that the U.S. will put pressure against South Korea to join in forming active partnership with

1) "Dual Circulation (雙循環)" strategy is a strategy to simultaneously promote domestic and international circulations but with the focus on a domestic circulation by increasing localization, expanding domestic consumption and supply chains, and reducing reliance on foreign supply chains.

the U.S. and become a part in containing China. In following, China will keep a close eye on South Korea's diplomatic decisions of whether to join the anti-China front, and push President Xi's early visit to Seoul to strengthen strategic communication. Hence, in order to achieve irreversible peace through denuclearization and peace process on the Korean Peninsula as well as economic cooperation and improvement of inter-Korean relations, it is deemed imperative that South Korea continue to seek the most relevant and reasonable measures in line with its national interest by intensifying strategic flexibility as much as possible. ❖

※ *Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.*

※ *This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.*