

Sejong Policy Brief



THE SEJONG INSTITUTE

No. 2020-19 (December 11, 2020)

Executive Summary

Measures of Cooperation with the Biden Administration in North Korean Affairs



HONG Hyun-ik

(hyunik@sejong.org)

*Senior Research Fellow,
The Sejong Institute*

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

Executive Summary

○ Support of Biden's Transition Team in South Korea's North Korea Policy

- The ROK Government should be fully prepared and swiftly and effectively implement every possible measure to ensure that South Korea and the U.S. can actively cooperate and create synergy in resuming the peace process on the Korean Peninsula by encouraging Biden's transition team and his future administration to quickly respond to South Korea's policy related to North Korea and nuclear weapon issues.

○ Biden's Perception on North Korea

- President-elect Joe Biden is a veteran politician with a forward-looking perception of diplomacy and has shown his will to negotiate even with so-called rouge states such as North Korea. However, Biden has emphasized tough measures against North Korea, including isolation and sanctions, and bottom-up style of negotiations through working-level talks in consideration of the past actions of North Korea and his political position as a former vice president and a rival to President Trump.

- During his term as a vice president, Biden carried out his diplomatic stance that values negotiations by normalizing relations between the U.S. and Cuba and achieving nuclear agreement with Iran. Along with such points, it is notable that Biden stresses on issues of verification and human rights.

○ Possibilities of the U.S.-DPRK Negotiations in the Biden Administration

- The upcoming Biden administration can be an opportunity factor for the U.S.-DPRK negotiation on following points. First, this administration is likely to listen to South Korea's position; second, this administration has higher policy predictability; third, there is a possibility of the U.S. to create more room for flexible management of sanctions against North Korea; fourth, this administration is open to hold a summit if North Korea agrees to reduce its nuclear capability; fifth, it will be difficult for Washington to neglect Pyongyang, because North Korea's nuclear capability has been strengthened to the level of threatening the U.S.

- At the same time, limiting factors also exist. The transition team is facing urgent domestic problems related to racial conflicts and the COVID-19. It will be difficult to pay attention to the North Korean issues. Hearings on high-ranking diplomatic officials will be held for several months, and so, the U.S.-DPRK negotiation is likely to be delayed. There could be other challenging factors, considering tough statements of Biden against North Korea, Biden's opposition to Trump's policies, and possible provocation of North Korea due to misjudgment. Appropriate responses are imperative.

○ Future Prospect

- On July 10, 2020, Pyongyang hinted that it is ready to start a negotiation with the U.S. through the statement of Kim Yo-jong. In September, two leaders of the two Koreas exchanged letters. However, North Korea did not come to the table for negotiations with South Korea and the U.S. due to the North's handling of the COVID-19, the murder of a South Korean official in the West Sea in September and the Trump administration's preparation for the presi-

dential election.

- Considering the past conduct, it is difficult to expect North Korea to voluntarily and actively engage in dialogue and negotiations even if its economy is severely harmed. Pyongyang will agree to talk if the South Korean government and the Biden transition team provide the North enough justification for dialogue and excuses to save face.

- If the South Korean government does not show any move, North Korea is expected to watch the Biden administration's North Korea policy. It is also expected to refrain from provocations until late January of 2021 due to the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea in early January, Biden's inauguration on January 20 and the North's Supreme People's Assembly in late January.

- However, in the meantime, if the Biden administration does not show its willingness to engage in North Korean affairs, Pyongyang will declare a tough stance against the U.S. at the Congress and the Supreme People's Assembly. Furthermore, it is difficult to rule out the possibility of the North to launch a major provocation in the first half of 2021. In this case, the Korean Peninsula will face another crisis, and the possibility of restoring the peace process will be extremely low.

○ Policy Proposal: Measures of the ROK-U.S. Cooperation in Strategy for North Korea

- Based on the lessons in early 1993 and early 2009, South Korea should make the Biden administration to become the third term of the Clinton administration, not the third term of the Obama administration, by deterring North Korea's misjudgment, encouraging the U.S. to engage and not abandon the North, and restoring the peace process on the Korean Peninsula through the

preparation for swift cooperation with the U.S.

- South Korea should secure communication channels for inter-Korean dialogue as soon as possible, express its intention to restore inter-Korean relations through all available channels, and deter North Korea's hasty provocations. The South can further advise the North to take an initiative to cease nuclear activities, possibly on a conditional base.

- The South Korean government should persuade the Biden transition team that an early engagement with the North is a wise decision by reminding them of the experience of North Korea's provocation in early 2009, which spoiled the mood despite the optimistic observation of Washington that Pyongyang will make concessions. Seoul can advise Washington that it would be a good start if the U.S. appoints a new North Korea Policy Coordinator, respects the June 12 Singapore Declaration and expresses its willingness to adopt the end-of-war declaration.

- South Korea's North Korea policy team should work closely with the Biden transition team to make an agreement on the basic direction of the step-by-step approach, the scope of North Korea's denuclearization, and the details of the phased, correspondent measures of the U.S. in accordance with North Korea's denuclearization process. Afterward, South Korea should inform and obtain China's consent and then present the agreed materials to North Korea. It would be an ideal timeline if North Korea reflects this outcome at the Party Congress in next January and the U.S. resumes working-level negotiations at the beginning of Biden's term, before the ROK-U.S. joint drills in March.

- It is important to gain support for normalization and improvement of inter-Korean relations in the logic that amicable inter-Korean relations will help the U.S. and North Korea resume negotiations.

- It seems appropriate to take advantage of the Chinese government's influence on North Korea, promote economic cooperation among South Korea, North

Korea, and China, and establish an organization for Northeast Asian disease control and health cooperation that includes North Korea.

- When negotiations between North Korea and the U.S. begin, it would be ideal to take a roadmap with three-step approach after building mutual trust. Obstacles to the U.S.-DPRK negotiations will be nuclear report system, the subject of denuclearization, guarantee of irreversibility, and verification. In terms of verification, North Korea must adopt a forward-looking attitude. For the rest, the U.S. must be more flexible ultimately for mutual security. ♣

※ 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.