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The Biden-Moon Summit: Double Illusions?

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

The 21 May Biden-Moon Summit, which took place just five weeks after the Washington visit by Japanese prime minister Suga, illustrated what happens when competing strategic illusions pair off against one another.

COMMENTARY

ON 21 MAY 2021, South Korean President Moon Jae-in visited President Joe Biden at the White House, following Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's 16 April visit by about five weeks. The unmistakable East Asian accent of the first face-to-face bilateral summits with the recently installed US president clearly ushered in a new era of Sinocentric US foreign policy.

That's where the parallel between the Suga and Moon visits ends, however. The Suga summit was a limited success based on core agreement on essential strategic interests. The Moon visit was "spun" into a manufactured success that skirted persistent if evolving frictions in the bilateral relationship.

Moon's 'Success'

President Moon contributed to "success" by trimming his ideological sails in hopes of getting a political boost for his unpopular party in the presidential election scheduled for May 2022.

He pledged US\$40 billion in high-tech US investment and agreed that South Korean and US forces in South Korea should be better integrated into the broader US regional strategy whose focus is deterrence of China. He thus signed on to the US view of

deterrence first, diplomacy second, so acknowledged that no Biden-Kim summits are likely before the South Korean election.

Moon got what he came for: 550,000 COVID vaccine doses for the South Korean military. Washington also dropped agreed limits in range and payload on South Korean missiles in effect since 1979. Relatedly, the two sides affirmed their intention to progress towards the transfer of operational military command (OPCOM, in alliance lingo) of the 27,500 US troops in South Korea from US to South Korean (ROK) auspices.

The US contribution to “success” resided in the fact that US officials consider Moon a lame duck president better waited out than accommodated. His approval rating hovers at around 30 percent and polls show key Democratic Party (DP) policy views to be broadly unpopular.

The likely election of a rival Peoples Power Party (PPP) government in May 2022, US officials think, will bring ROK policy into line with that of Japan and the US.

Differences That Matter

Several differences between the current state of the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances throw light on the two summits’ outcomes, and illustrate the oddities of the US-ROK relationship.

Since the neo-totalitarian aspirations of the Xi Jinping regime became clear, Japanese officials have favoured more muscular US deterrence postures. Trump seemed an improvement over the second Obama administration, but Biden’s election raised concern over a regression. The Biden administration’s “extreme competition” posture seemed to have led to some relief in Tokyo.

South Korea under Moon has taken the opposite position. Instead of pushing Washington, Seoul has strived to avoid being pushed by it. This leaves it free to essentially appease China in hopes that Beijing would pressure North Korea to accommodate Moon’s denuclearisation and unification line.

Moon’s extended “Sunshine” policy view, originally promulgated in 1998 by President Kim Dae-jung, could hardly differ more from Japan’s stoic realism.

The North Korea Factor

Japanese leaders know that North Korea will shed its nuclear weapons under only two conditions: a crisis of unknown provenance that destroys the current regime; and the increasingly remote possibility that the Kim dynasty would trade its ultima ratio for a US security guarantee against China.

President Moon, on the other hand, is ideologically committed to the proposition that the North wants to denuclearise, formally end the Korean War and normalise its relations with the US.

His intra-Korean reconciliation diplomacy, punctuated by Moon’s repeated urging that

US leaders reduce sanctions against North Korea and conduct new US-DPRK summits he can influence — like the Trump-Kim Summits in Singapore and Hanoi — is designed to lubricate his vision of denuclearised reunification and earn him the historic-scale political credit he dreams of.

So while Japan desires maximally robust US deterrence capabilities nearby, DP leaders hold US military deployments in and around Korea responsible for harming efforts to conciliate with North Korea.

Moon has said calming things about the US, but he would dissolve or radically reorient the US-ROK alliance if he could. Since he cannot, he seeks South Korean control over its own military options mainly to ensure that ROK forces are never actually called on to fight.

Competing Errors

Moon's view is somewhere between an error and a fantasy, as are his related assumptions that China favours a unified Korea and would countenance the end of the North Korean nuclear programme.

But most US analysts believe that the continued presence of US ground troops in South Korea still serves a benign tripwire function despite the end of the Cold War, the rusting of North Korea's conventional military capabilities, and its presumed ability to strike the continental US with nuclear weapons. That belief, the reification of a decades-old mental habit, also now qualifies as something between error and fantasy.

US ground troops in South Korea stoke anti-Americanism, contribute to the polarisation of ROK politics and thus enable DP ideologues to occupy the Blue House. They also make plump targets for North Korean artillery in the event of a major military crisis, so actually hamstringing US options in such a crisis.

Their presence nevertheless guarantees major US involvement in another war in Korea regardless of whether it serves any vital US national security interest. In sum, they constitute a strategic liability for the US.

So the 21 May Biden-Moon Summit was that oddest of birds in statecraft: two sides hewing either obsessively or habitually to conflicting points of view that nevertheless spite their own interests.

Needed: A More Flexible US Regional Security Posture

The Biden administration should have welcomed Moon's desire to reconfigure the US-ROK alliance and, indeed, ending the missile limitations and movement toward an OPCOM shift both point that way. Yet the logical conclusion — remove US ground troops in but maintain the US nuclear umbrella over South Korea — never occurred.

It should also have respected South Korea's desire not to be made publicly to choose between the US and China. Enhancing South Korea's military clout and independence serves US aims without need for hanging an anti-China placard around Seoul's neck.

Moreover, Washington's pointing South Korea at China increases Beijing's incentive to answer by enabling North Korean nuclear-weapons brinkmanship as a decoupling agent against US alliance relationships throughout the region.

US deterrence posture in the Indo-Pacific would benefit from segregating the insoluble mess of Korea from the rest of the region, and building up its regional politico-military footprint elsewhere. Maintaining the US-ROK alliance status quo with mere incremental adjustments harms the prospect.

Japanese officials grasp this logic but chafe at the unstable transition it implies. The Biden administration should therefore partner with Tokyo toward a more flexible and robust regional security posture. Had this been thought through five months ago, that effort could have begun on 16 April when Prime Minister Suga was in Washington.

Adam Garfinkle is a non-resident Distinguished Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg