

Biden's North Korea Policy: Can Washington Solve this Time the 70-year Old North Korea Issues?

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Washington's North Korea policy was designed to change the Juche regime and eliminate the nuclear threat of Pyongyang.

But, the policy of regime change has failed because of wrong strategies. Washington has relied on harsh and hostile strategy which has rather strengthened the Juche regime. The sun-shine policy could have done better.

Moreover, Washington's policy of denuclearization of North Korea has also failed because of mutual mistrust and North Korea demonization.

If Biden wishes to succeed with his North Korea policy, he should revise the very philosophy of its North Korea policy; he should better understand North Korea in the light of more objective information about the country; he should accept North Koreans as normal people; he should free himself from North Korea demonization.

Joe Biden became the 46th president of the U.S. on January 20, 2021. Few would envy him. He will have the glory and power, but the weight of his glory and power might be easily outweighed by the heavy burden of solving immediate problems left unsolved by Trump.

His immediate challenges are several. He has to continue the difficult fight against the pandemic. He has to restore the torn economy. Both tasks are mission quasi impossible. They require innovative imagination, bold determination, a lot of resources, and especially people's trust in the government. Before anything else, Biden needs sustained cooperation of the people. But, the violent revolt of people in Washington on January 6 demonstrates the width and the depth of the division of the American people. The biggest challenge for Biden is the unification of the people and unified popular cooperation.

But, the unified cooperation of the American people for the fight against the corona-virus and the revival of the economy is not easy because of American people's cumulated dissatisfaction with political and economic leadership of Washington. The pro-business policy has widened the income gap between the rich and the poor and killed the American dream. The racial discrimination remains unsolved. The mass killing on the street is a daily event.

The insurrection of January 6 shows the frustration and the anger of a significant part of American white population who are the victims of high technology, neo-liberal free trade and the corruption culture in Washington. They are in a way alienated people; they are the people who have lost the American dream. They shout “We want the country back!”, that is, a country where their voice was heard; this is the war cry of the white supremacy group. As long as Trumpism is around, this group will make noise and threaten the American society.

Given the size of its economy, the U.S. could have solved these internal problems. But, leaders have not solved them. Why did Washington fail to solve these problems? The obvious reason is the never ending war and Washington’s global police role which has not been always solicited. The war and the global police work of Washington have prevented the government from investing adequate resources for the solution of the internal problems. Leaders in Washington should ask themselves to what extent the war and global police work has imposed hardship on the American people.

It is about the time for Biden to reduce investments in making wars in the name of global order; it is not too early for Biden to allocate more resources to the solution of internal problems. In fact, Biden in his speech of February 5, 2021 on foreign policy promised such policy. It is sincerely hoped that he will succeed with this policy.



Trump and Kim meet Sunday before Trump became first US president to step on North Korean territory.
(White House photo)

It is also the time for ending 70-year old irritating issue of North Korean crisis. In fact, Biden could be the first American leader who can bring shining peace on the Korean peninsula, if he so desires. He is surely one of the American presidents who know well foreign relations. And, Kim Jong-un is ready to negotiate with Biden for the final solution; this is indicated in his speech at the 8th congress of the Workers Party of Korea held in Pyongyang on January 5-12, 2021.

In his concluding speech, Kim Jong-un made three meaningful points. First, the peace dialogue with Trump was a big success in improving the image of North Korea. Second, the

U.S. remains the chief obstacle and enemy to the development of North Korea. Third, he would deal “power with power and good with good” (힘으로 힘으로, 선으로 선으로). Here, we can read Kim Jong-un’s mind. He is ready to continue the peace negotiations but as equal negotiating partner. However, this requires mutual trust and respect which were made possible by President Moon Jae-in’s mediation role at the Trump-Kim dialogue. President Moon will leave his office in 2022. Hence, Washington and Pyongyang should make real efforts to dissipate the mutual mistrust and even hatred cumulated over decades.

Moreover, to succeed with his North Korea policy, Biden should clarify its objectives. Officially, Washington’s North Korea policy is to make Korea more open and more democratic nation on the one hand and, on the other, assure regional security by denuclearizing North Korea. But both policies have failed.

But, is it a really a failure? In South Korea, there are those experts in North Korean affairs who doubt if the regime change or the denuclearization was the real objective of Washington’s North Korea policy. They even think that Washington’s hidden objective was to keep the Juche regime and the nuclear programs so that it can justify the huge presence of US military in South Korea needed for China containment strategy and the expansion of US military equipment market in the East Asian region. If this is the case, what seems to be the failure of Washington’s North Korea policy could be, in fact, a success.

However, in this paper, I assume that the objective of Biden’s North Korea policy is the democratization and the denuclearization of North Korea. In this paper, I am tackling two related issues: the reason of failure of U.S. North Korea policy and Biden’s alternative approach to his North Korea policy.

Why has Washington failed in its North Korea Policy?

Washington’s idea of making the Juche regime more open and more democratic country relied on two strategies. One was to invade with South Korean army to destroy the regime and transplant a sort of democracy. It is more than likely that it was rather the Korean conservative government which insisted more on this strategy. As a matter of fact, in 2017, when Trump was threatening Pyongyang with “fire and fury”, the South Korean president, Mme Park Geun-hye, daughter of, the military dictator, Gen. Park Chung-hee was reported to have cried with joy “Jackpot” suggesting the windfall benefit of the military invasion. Actually, the idea of military invasion of North Korea was not new. Bill Clinton tried in early 1990s; in 1968, under Lyndon B. Johnson, when the USS Pueblo was captured by North Korean armed forces, the military invasion was on the table. However, the military invasion did not take place simply because of heavy human casualties including the deaths of American GIs and their families in South Korea and Japan.

The second option of changing Juche regime was the use of pressure provided by annual joint military exercises, international isolation of Pyongyang, anti-North Korea propaganda and the sanctions. None of these measures worked. True, the joint military exercises of American and South Korean armed forces were so violent and threatening that North Koreans were utterly terrorised. But, the people of North Korean endured and blamed Washington and Seoul instead of complaining against Pyongyang.

The strategy of isolating North Korea from international community was not a major problem, for Juche ideology was intended to make North Korea to survive as much as

possible without depending on other countries. The anti-North Korea propaganda took two forms. First, the negative image of North Korea was created on the basis of biased information provided by North Korean refugees and it was diffused through anti-Pyongyang media in the West, in general, and Korea and the U.S., in particular.

Another method has been the air-born balloons showing the superiority of the South Korean democracy to the North Korean regime on the one hand and, on the other, demonizing the Juche regime. However, the air-born anti-Juche propaganda balloons have produced little expected results, because North Koreans despised South Korea society under the conservative government for its corruption and its being vassal country of the U.S.

Finally, the dreadful sanctions have not brought down the Juche regime. It is hard to imagine how North Koreans have survived these sanctions. It is true that the black markets and the underground China-North Korea trade network may have provided an answer. But, the more meaningful factor was the character of North Koreans. We must remember that leaders of North Koreans are mostly the descendents of Patriots who fought against the Japanese invaders; they are determined nationalists. They are proud of establishing an autonomous self-sufficient nation and adopting unique socialist ideology – the Jucheism – despite the heavy pressure imposed by the Soviet Union and China. They are the people who survived the terrible decade-long starvation and misery in the 1990s.

The sanctions have proved to be a wrong approach of the American policy of North Korean regime change or denuclearization. They have failed in changing the Juche regime or denuclearizing North Korea. The sanctions have turned out to be too destructive. They have pushed 25 million North Korean people to starve; they have killed a great number of children because of the shortage of medical facilities and medicines.

In other words, these sanctions have not been a great contributor to Washington's North Korea policy. If so, how do we justify the sanctions? Is there anyone who benefits from these sanctions? To be sure, the American people are not benefitting from these sanctions. The potential traders with North Korea would be the losers. These sanctions – if it continues – can destroy completely the very foundation of the survival of millions of people as a nation. In this sense, prolonged sanctions could be the worst kind of human right violation.

It is sincerely hoped that Biden gives serious thought to the use of sanctions as a tool of North Korea policy.

Washington has failed also in its policy of North Korea's denuclearization. Clinton had a good chance in 1994; George W. Bush had a good possibility in 2005, Trump had a golden chance in 2019. But, they all blew these opportunities. The main reason for the failure was the absence of interest of Washington to solve the nuclear crisis or the mutual hatred. It is possible that the two factors are all responsible.

To sum up, the performance of Washington's North Korea policy is a failure. So, if Biden wished to do something to solve the 70-year old North Korea headache, he should do something different from what his predecessors have done.

What should be Biden's North Korea Policy?

The success of Biden's North Korea policy requires a few preconditions. Washington should get rid of Pyongyang demonization deriving from mutual mistrust and mutual hatred.

Moreover, Washington should accept the reality of North Korea as a de facto nuclear weapon state. And, finally, Biden should speed up the process of the normalization of Washington-Pyongyang diplomatic relations.

What are the origins of mutual mistrust and hatred?

To find the root of mistrust and hatred between the U.S. and North Korea, we have to go back to the period of the Korean War (1950-1953), which ended with no clear-cut winner, but it created deep lasting relations of mistrust and hatred between the U.S. and North Korea.

North Koreans do not forget what the U.S. did against innocent civilians during the Korean War. According to reliable sources, about 20% of North Korean population-4 million out of 20 million-were bombed to death. More than 80% of the victims were women and children. The American bombers destroyed every single standing structure. The American bombers dropped about 700,000 tons of bombs as against 500,000 tons of bombs dropped on Japan during the 4-year war. The U.S. dropped the napalm bombs which burn the flesh of victims.

General Douglas MacArthur said this about American bombing on North Korea: "A slaughter never heard of in the history of mankind."

For North Koreans, it is difficult to forget what the U.S. has done. We can easily imagine what kind of feeling North Korean would have toward the Americans. In the eyes of North Koreans, Americans are brutal, not trust worthy and even hateful. These feeling have lasted for 70 years.

On the other hand, Americans also have hostile feeling toward North Korea. The U.S. did not win the Korean War. This was humiliating for a country which had won the World War II. The U.S. lost 54,000 lives of which 33,000 on the battle ground. The American prisoners of war suffered from physical and psychological torture during the Korean War. The capture of USS Pueblo in 1968 and the shooting-down of an American spy aircraft in 1969 did hurt the pride of Americans. For the citizens of the mighty super power like the U.S., it may be difficult to swallow the insult. So, Americans hate North Koreans.

The point here is that the mutual hatred is one of major difficulties to overcome in the Washington-Pyongyang relations. True, such mutual hatred has dissipated, but it is still there and the politicians exploit such feeling for their political and financial interests. If Biden wants really to solve the North Korean problem, he has to do something to further dissipate the mutual hatred.

How bad is the demonization of North Korea?

The North Korea demonization is a widely-spread perception of the great majority of Americans. This has been deliberately promoted by warmongering Washington establishment, media and academics. As long as the demonized image of North Korea is deeply imprinted in the minds of Americans, it is by no means easy to get rid of it, and Biden will have hard time to go forward in his engagement with North Korea.

The demonization of North Korea relies on the simple and dangerous arguments. It goes like this. North Korea is a military threat; Juche ideology is an ideological threat; North Korea is the worst violator of human rights; North Korean government is authoritarian. However, the most important threat is the military threat.

The West, in particular, the U.S., argues that North Korea is a military threat. Therefore, one cannot trust North Korea. Hence, one has to punish North Korea. The best way to punish North Korea is to use military force. The pre-emptive attack is justified. If necessary, North Korea should be punished with nuclear weapons.

But, we must be honest with ourselves. Can North Korea be a real threat? If it is, to whom is it a threat? It is true that North Korea threatened South Korea. The tool of threat was the vast set of several thousand artillery pieces deployed along the demarcation line. It was the period when Pyongyang threatened by shouting “We can make Seoul a sea of fire!” But we knew that it was a simple rhetoric, for South Korea could retaliate.

It is true that North Korea made six nuclear tests and 147 missile tests. But are these tests conducted to threaten some country? Or, are they designed to serve as deterrent against foreign attacks? The response to these questions is simple enough; it is for the deterrence purpose.

If there are countries which could be the target of North Korean threat, it would be the U.S., South Korea and Japan. But, this is a pure nonsense. To begin with, North Korean GDP was, in 2019, about 32 billion USD as against 1.7 trillion USD of South Korea, about 5.3 trillion USD of Japan and 23 trillion USD of the United States. North Korea’s annual defence budget was mere 7 billion USD as against 700 billion USD in the U.S., more than 40 billion USD in South Korea and 50 billion USD in Japan.

So, the combined GDP of the U.S., Japan and South Korea was 30,000 billion USD as against North Korea’s 32 billion USD. The combined defence budget of the three countries which could be targets of North Korea’s threats was 790 billion USD as against 7 billion USD for North Korea. Can you imagine a situation where the tiny North Korea can threaten these three economic and military powers?

North Korea is not stupid enough to attack these countries with its nuclear weapons, because it knows very well that it is pure “harakiri” (Bushido-inspired suicide).

What should be the strategies of Biden’s North Korea Policy?

In what follows, I will discuss what Biden’s North Korea policy strategies should be. My hypothesis is that Biden will sincerely seek for the real solution for peace and prosperity in North Korea. This is only a hypothesis. I am not convinced that Biden will do that. What I am saying is that, if Biden wants to do something of historical significance, he should do what I am suggesting.

To solve the North Korean problems, Biden should do this.

First, before anything else, he should stop North Korea demonization and get rid of mutual mistrust and mutual hatred so that American public accept North Korea as a normal society. This would require heavy investments in the friendship building promoted by cultural and sport exchanges.

Second, he should accept North Korea as a nuclear weapon state, conduct well planned arms control and normalize the diplomatic relations. It appears that the level of North Korean nuclear capacity is beyond what the West would like to admit. The system of training nuclear experts at universities and the military seems well established. The system of the production of nuclear weapons seems well developed. The capacity to transport the nuclear

war heads seems operational. Even if denuclearization takes place, it is just unrealistic to suppose that North Korea will give up all of its cumulated nuclear capacity. In this case, the more realistic approach would be to accept North Korea as a nuclear weapon state, agree upon a moratorium on nuclear programs and conduct progressive reduction of nuclear capacity in exchange of the progress of the peace process including the lifting of sanctions.

Third, the process of the creation of normal diplomatic relations should include the following approaches.

To begin with, it is not too early to make the declaration of the end of the Korean War. It has only declaratory meaning; it has no de jure significance. Besides, after three North-South Summits, the Korean War ended as far as the two Koreas are concerned. I believe that, if Biden decides to make such declaration, no country including China would object. Even Japan would not object, for Tokyo is keen to establish normal diplomatic relations with country of Jucheism. The declaration of the end of the Korean War is useful in building mutual trust between Washington and Pyongyang.

As for the joint military exercises, they may be necessary for training, the maintenance of disciplines and the tests of new weapons. But it is better not to give the impression that these exercises are designed to intimidate or attack North Korea.

What is the most important is the removal of the sanctions. One wonders what the sanctions have achieved so far. What are the objectives of these sanctions? The objectives may include the regime change and denuclearization. None of these objectives has been attained. The Jucheism is still there; Kim Jong-in has nuclear bombs; Washington has not been able to isolate North Korea. Pyongyang is not as isolated as one may wish to believe. North Korea has diplomatic relations with 164 countries.

The final step toward the solution of North Korean problem is the establishment of Washington's diplomatic relations with North Korea. It is more likely that Biden might oppose such measure because of the issue of human right violation. But, do we know the exact situation of human right abuse in North Korea? Can we trust the related information provided by the North Korean refugees? Should we generalize the experiences of some refugees? It may be impossible to find answers to these questions. It seems that the abuse of human right exists in North Korea as it does in many countries including China and even the U.S. But, this issue has not prevented Washington from normalizing diplomatic relations with many countries.

Remember that Richard Nixon who was well aware of the violation of human rights under Mao Zedong established the normal diplomatic relations in 1979 with China. George W. Bush did not make major fuss about this problem. Even Barack Obama was ready in 2014 to accept Xi Jinping's proposal for "New Power Relations between super Powers" despite China's violation of human rights. The issue of human right abuse in North Korea cannot be and should not be the excuse for not having normal diplomatic relations with Pyongyang.

I may conclude by saying that the normalization of Washington's diplomatic relations with North Korea is the only way to solve the North Korean problems. If Washington succeeds this policy, it might even contribute to the improvement of Washington's hegemonic position in East Asia and enforce its image as a peace loving super power which is generous toward such a small country like North Korea.

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