

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Press Briefing

“President Moon Jae-in’s Visit to Washington”

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H. Andrew
Schwartz:

Good afternoon, colleagues, and welcome to our briefing today on the summit between President Moon of South Korea and President Biden. We have today a great group of my colleagues. And we'd like to start it off with Victor Cha for opening remarks from Victor. Who – Victor, of course, senior vice president at CSIS and Korea Chair.

Victor Cha:

Great. Thanks, Andrew.

So as you all – as you all know very well, President Moon will be making his trip to Washington. He's on his way right now. This will be his 10th meeting with a U.S. president, but obviously the first meeting with President Biden. They'll be meeting for the better part of the day on Friday. Both a combination of small meetings and larger Cabinet meetings, meeting with CEOs, some remembrance stuff with regard to the Korean War.

Overall, you know, it's obviously a very important trip, both for South Korea and for the United States. For Moon, he's in the last year of a single five-year presidency. Has just come off elections – by elections, in which the ruling party suffered a big defeat. He's facing some challenges on the vaccine front with regard to COVID, which we'll talk about later. So you know, he really needs this to be a good trip, from his own perspective. And for Biden, you know, this is a real opportunity because Korea's a very important player on climate, as Jane will talk about, on tech issues, and potentially also on vaccines as well. So there's a real opportunity to make the summit resonate with his – with his broader build back better agenda in the United States and abroad.

You know, we fully expect that they will reaffirm the strength of the alliance. The last four years was a pretty difficult period. They've set the stage very well by removing one of the very difficult issues that plagued the relationship over the past four years, which was the absence of an agreement on cost sharing – the so-called burden sharing or Special Measures Agreement. That has been removed from – sorry, that's my dog – that has been removed from the agenda. So they have a good platform upon which to – which to move forward. A lot of the dialogues that were not really in play have all been restarted, the bilateral defense dialogues. So there's a lot – you know, there's a lot of good stuff happening, a good platform to move forward on.

Blinken's trip to Korea was quite successful, you know, last spring. The national security advisor came to see Jake Sullivan shortly after that. So they've already had quite a bit of discussion. The issues will, you know, obviously be – will be North Korea. They will be about regional relations – Japan, China. The Biden administration's initiative on the Quad. There'll be – the economic part of this agenda I think will be quite large, having to do

with tech issues, with climate. And so it's a full agenda, a full plate. And we'll talk about each of these issues in turn. Back to you, Andrew.

H. Andrew
Schwartz:

Thank you, Victor.

And now we'd like to turn it over to our colleague Sue Terry.

Sue Mi Terry:

Thanks, Andrew. Victor already gave a good background, so just adding two points briefly.

Yeah, as far as, I think, the key message coming out of the summit will be the alliance relationship is strong, its future is very strong. They are working to modernize, expand the alliance. The two leaders are meeting in the aftermath of having completed Special Measures Agreement. So atmosphere is good, as Victor said. And both sides will try to signal that the two allies are closely coordinating on North Korea policy, as well as a host of regional and global issues, from climate to global health to technology issues.

I do think there will be a deliverable – a concrete deliverables that they can point to, to show that the summit is successful, was successful. For the Moon administration I think vaccine partnership is the key deliverable and very, very important for President Moon because this year, as Victor mentioned, this one has been a tough year for him and the ruling party. His popularity has fallen significantly due to a number of domestic issues. You know, from soaring housing prices to real estate speculation scandal that really led to eruption of national outrage. There's public frustration and disappointment with the Moon government's handling of vaccine rollout.

Recent Gallup Korea survey showed for the first time negative feedback on the government's pandemic response outweighing the positive when – you know, and this is actually important because successful COVID response was one of the main things that the Moon administration could sort of, you know, tout. So this vaccine rollout, it's not been going well. And so it's critical for President Moon to leave Washington with some sort of vaccine commitment or vaccine agreement. And we can talk about that. I think there will be other deliverables too. Cooperation on climate, on tech. I've seen talk about a lot of good things happening.

Just two quick comments on Quad and North Korea policy coordination. On Quad, you know, the Biden administration is going to see if there's a possibility of linking up the Indo-Pacific approach to Moon Jae-in's southern strategy. But I think they already announced that they're not going to push South Korea to join the Quad formally at this time. But just – you know, they would certainly if Quad-lite, if that's a phrase, is possible, if not quite Quad plus, because, you know, the South Koreans would want that anyway,

to join here and there selectively on an ad hoc basis, and cooperate on issues that are not seen as threatening to China.

Just we can talk more on North Korea. I think this is one area where they are going to say, you know, they're closely coordinating, there's no daylight between Seoul and Washington. But this is one area – one issue where I don't see a big deliverable coming out. You know, the Biden administration has announced in the aftermath of North Korea review – so-called North Korea review, policy review, that there's a third way that they are pursuing, a calibrated practical approach of denuclearization, a phased agreement. But in reality, it's not so different from sort of the Obama redux since Kim Jong-un has insisted that he won't give up anything unless the U.S. lifts sanctions first, even for step-by-step approach, so – and that's a nonstarter for the Biden administration.

So my point is the impasse is there. Moon administration has very short period of time, less than a year, to make progress. So they have sense of urgency, a little bit of desperation to move forward on North Korea. But again, here I don't think there's going to be much of, you know, anything coming out of this summit, except to say that they are working very closely and coordinating very closely. But I'll be more than happy to talk about North Korea further later. Thanks.

H. Andrew Schwartz:

Thank you, Sue.

And with that I'd like to turn it over to my colleague Mike Green. Mike is our senior vice president at CSIS, and also our Japan Chair, and head of all of our Asia programs. Mike.

Michael J. Green:

Yeah, thank you, Andrew.

So as Sue pointed out, Moon Jae-in would very much like in the summit for Joe Biden to move towards Korea's position, Seoul's position, on North Korea, to get Biden to agree to a peace treaty or an end of war declaration, formally ending the Korean War, as a kind of final legacy for the South Korean president in his last year. And I think the Biden administration has no real interest in that because it will leave them with all the cleanup of actually working on denuclearization, having given away a huge prize to the North.

But just as the Moon Blue House would like for Biden to move to their position on North Korea, the Biden White House will have as a high priority on May 21st trying to get President Moon to move closer to the U.S. position on China and Japan. The Korean government position right now is described by scholars and experts in Korea as strategic ambiguity. Korea doesn't want to have to choose between its close U.S. ally and its big

economic trading partner, China. And there are some reasons for that I think the Biden administration will appreciate.

Geographically South Korea is just much closer to China than Japan, or Australia, or India, or members of the Quad. The South Korean government thinks that China is critical to its strategy to entice North Korea into talks. A lot of us are skeptical that that's a thing, but the government in Seoul certainly believes it needs China for North Korea. And then economically Korea is more dependent on China than Japan, or Australia, or other U.S. allies. So I think the administration understands that.

But at the same time, this South Korean policy of strategic ambiguity is proving increasingly awkward and almost untenable for Seoul because other middle powers that are not the U.S. or Japan – countries like Canada or France or the U.K. Middle powers like Australia are adjusting their China policies, doing more with the U.S. and Japan in reinforcing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, and other countries – Britain, France, Canada – are looking at a la carte participation in the Quad. So Korea's strategic ambiguity stands out more internationally, does not look good as other countries that also have, you know, different relations with China than the U.S. are beginning to adjust. And Korea's largely self-isolating as a result.

Also, Korean public opinion on China is souring. It's quite negative. So the government also has to consider domestic public opinion.

So I think on that front Biden and Moon will find some room for creativity. You know, the Koreans are not going to be asked to join the Quad. There's not a consensus among the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India to bring on new members. But there will be opportunities for this a la carte participation.

Korea's policy towards Southeast Asia involves a lot of the same elements as the U.S. or Australia or Japan – capacity building, women's empowerment, development, infrastructure financing. It shouldn't be too hard for Moon to align that more not only with the U.S., but with the Quad countries. So I think there will be some positive movement to show where Korea is as a defender of democratic norms and a stable and prosperous and open Indo-Pacific.

Japan, I think, also some prospect for small movement. The relationship between Japan and Korea is very complicated. There's a long history to get over. There's also a more immediate problem. The Supreme Court in Korea has ruled that Japanese companies can be held liable for what they did before the Japan-Korea normalization treaty in 1965. There are new court cases that raise questions about that and they haven't resolved it.

But in terms of the atmospherics, Biden is going to push with Moon, as he did with Suga, to make progress. And you've seen some small progress in trilateral meetings – General Milley and his counterparts in uniform, the national security advisers – and I think a trilateral summit of the leaders could be in the offing as well. So small progress. The biggest challenge there in some ways is that both Suga in Japan and Moon in Korea are losing public support because they are doing poorly in the COVID vaccination phase of this crisis, and so they don't have a lot of domestic room for maneuverability. So I think small progress on the Japan piece and the China piece.

The wildcard in all this is – as Victor and I know from being in the White House – Korea horse trades. Korea does transactional diplomacy. So you may get a we'll do more in the Quad if you do more with North Korea. You may find the summit surprises a little bit because of some horse trading, which Victor and I can tell you, and Sue as well from working in the White House, that's often a feature of U.S.-Korea summits, this kind of transactional approach to problems.

So over to Jane, I guess, on climate and energy.

Jane Nakano: Thanks so much, Mike. Thanks, Andrew, for organizing this. So this is Jane Nakano.

So the climate is a high priority for both Washington and Seoul. You know, both governments have pledged to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. And in fact, President Moon announced Korea's midcentury carbon-neutrality commitment in October, well in advance of the U.S. pledge to do the same following the inauguration of President Biden in January.

Also, the two governments strongly support the deployment of clean and renewable sources of energy. South Korea has a commitment to deploy over 1 million electric vehicles and 200,000 hydrogen cars on the road by 2025, and also large-scale offshore wind farms. And likewise, the Biden administration seeks to deploy a lot of offshore wind – 30 gigawatts by 2030 – and also to electrify the transportation sector. So the two governments have a lot – a lot in common with – a lot of synergy there.

As far as the climate and energy-related things to watch for out of the upcoming summit, there are two main things. One is that one of the key international climate agenda for the Biden administration is to end international financing of carbon-intensive fossil-fuel-based energy such as coal. When President Biden hosted the virtual leaders summit on climate a couple weeks ago, President Moon of South Korea announced South Korea's decision to end official financing of new coal-fired power projects overseas. This announcement was among the major highlights of the summit and

made South Korea a stronger ally to the United States on this front, especially as the Biden administration, you know, tries to urge China to rein in its coal-fired financing support abroad.

But you know, going forward, you know, South Korea currently has the pledge under the Paris Agreement to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by roughly, you know, a little over 24 percent by 2030, compared to the U.S. target of 50 percent reduction. It's, you know, viewed much less ambitious. And you know, Seoul has already indicated that it has, you know, plans to have much more ambitious target to be announced later this year toward the COP-26 meeting that's going to be held in the U.K. in November. So, at the summit, I think the two presidents are likely to sort of reaffirm the intent to keep sort of growing the climate ambition between the two countries.

But I think the bigger item, probably, here is that, you know, as the Biden administration seeks to achieve this ambitious climate goal while also, you know, trying to revitalize the U.S. domestic manufacturing base, including in the clean-energy technologies like electric vehicles, I think it will, you know, increasingly seek cooperation from partners and allies such as South Korea. You know, South Korea already has companies that are leading suppliers and producers of things like high-capacity batteries for electric vehicles. So as the United States tries to sort of address the supply chains – supply-chain security, you know, covering clean-energy technologies, I think there will be greater focus. And this time around, President Moon is scheduled to be accompanied by a few executives of Korea's major companies with – you know, the high-tech companies. So the visit could lead to greater technology cooperation and investment in the U.S. manufacturing capabilities in the clean-energy technologies such as, you know, likely investment and collaboration in lithium battery production and/or EV production plants in the United States.

So there's some concrete things that could come out of this summit. So, yeah, let me stop here. Thank you.

H. Andrew Schwartz:

Great.

And with that, Operator, we'd like to open it up to questions. If we could get the name and news organization of the questioner, that would be great. Thank you.

(Gives queuing instructions.)

Operator:

We have a question from Howard LaFranchi from Christian Science Monitor. Please go ahead.

Q:

Hi.

I guess my question is for Mike Green. You spoke about South Koreans' openness to horse trading, and then you – but you also talked about, you know, what were, perhaps, the top goals, you know, from each – from each president. You talked about Moon hoping to get some sort of armistice or formal declaration of the end of the Korean War before he leaves office and Biden moving Korea closer to Japan and China. So I'm wondering if you see any possibility of that horse trading coming into play there on those issues or if it's more likely to be on, you know, kind of, I guess, what you might say secondary priorities.

Michael J. Green:

So I'm speaking from historical experience, personal experience, rather than any sort of inside intel on what the dynamics are actually going to be like when President Moon and President Biden meet. But, you know, President Moon was chief of staff for President Roh Moo-hyun, and President Roh came into office in 2003, saying that the most important thing for him when he met with President Bush was to stop him from attacking North Korea with nuclear weapons.

It was pretty adversarial, to be honest, and a year later, to everyone's surprise, South Korea had the third largest contingent of troops in Iraq after the U.S. and Great Britain, and the source of that was, first and foremost, that Korea is a very, very strong ally and a good ally and depends enormously on American success in the world and had a stake in American success in Iraq. But also what drove it was that – and the way that sort of the more establishment alliance-oriented officials and politicians in Seoul sold it to Roh Moo-hyun was they told him if you do this for America, maybe the U.S. will be more forthcoming with North Korea like you want. And I can tell you, I was there in the White House. We were. I mean, our negotiating stance towards North Korea did open up it more, not only because of that but in part because the Korean side really convinced the White House that they were really good allies and we needed to help them.

So it was transactional. It was based on common values and interests, but it was kind of transactional. So I could imagine a scenario where, you know, to show the alliance is strong, the White House says we'll propose some new language encouraging North Korea to have diplomacy or we'll think about studying or including an end-of-war declaration in our negotiation, something to give some faith and some face to Moon. And Moon might say, you know, Korea is going to participate in some aspect of the Quad.

That kind of horse trading, in my experience, happens in U.S.-Korea summits a lot more than it does with China or Japan or India or other countries, and usually, frankly, for the better. And so, again, I don't have

insight, information, that that will happen, but I certainly will be watching to see if it does.

Sue Mi Terry: Can I –

Victor Cha: OK, great.

Sue Mi Terry: – jump in for a second? This is Sue, just to follow up on Mike’s comment.

There are a number of things that the South Koreans can ask for. I’m not sure about a peace declaration, because I think the Biden administration, I don’t believe they are ready to sort of declare peace or are ready to do this at this juncture. But, you know, they are going to certainly ask for more flexibility from the Biden administration on North Korea; like, for example, they will ask that Biden team will appoint a new special representative for North Korea to show that North Korea is a high priority for the Biden administration. I know that South Koreans were unhappy that they’re not going to have a new special representative for North Korea or some other incentives that could be offered to North Korea.

So there are other things besides peace agreement that I think that President Moon can ask for or sort of, you know, press President Biden on.

One thing I would note is that I do hope that President Moon is savvy enough to not come out sounding a bit preachy on this. As Mike knows well, we have past experience where, you know, we had a South Korean president meeting with U.S. president – I’m talking about Kim Dae-jung meeting with President Bush in 2001 – that didn’t go so well after President Kim Dae-jung tried to sort of be lecture-y or preachy with President Bush on how to do things with North Korea. So it’s a little bit of a, I think, sensitive thing where you have to do this well so it doesn’t come across as too pushy.

Michael J. Green: I think Sue’s point is a really good one. And I think – I’m sure the foreign ministry and senior advisers are telling President Moon that.

There is a little bit of desperation, though – you know, lame-duck president trying to leave a legacy on North Korea. So that will be also very interesting to watch, to see how the tone looks when they actually meet.

Victor Cha: So this is Victor. And so I would suggest, and just for argument’s sake, that, you know, that that particularly deliverable – that particular deliverable may have already happened, right, in the sense that, you know, Kurt Campbell did an interview with Yonhap in which he said that – he effectively said something to the effect that they – that the Biden administration is going to build on the Singapore summit, right; the

Singapore declaration. It didn't say it was going to follow the Singapore declaration, but something along the lines that they acknowledge and support and are going to abide by it, which is, you know, what the Moon government wanted on that.

So it could be that – it could be that the administration is trying to deflect North Korea being the metric for this summit by putting that out there first. And then, you know, for both the Moon and the Biden governments, you know, the big issue then become the investments that Jane was talking about and the vaccine diplomacy, which is – you know, it's big for both sides. I mean, you know, Moon, clearly needs help on vaccines, sooner rather than later. But there's great potential for the United States and South Korea to work on production arrangements if, you know, the Biden administration's also going to focus on global distribution of vaccines. So it could be that they may have tried to preempt that particular issue by Kurt's discussions earlier this week.

Operator: And next we have a question from Sangmin Lee with Radio Free Asia. Please go ahead.

Q: Yes. Yeah, I want to ask, you mentioned that the reason why [inaudible] announced kind of a Singapore summit – I mean, the Singapore agreement is going to be trying to deflect North Korean issue during their summit. Can you tell me why doing this, they trying to deflect such North Korean issue during the summit?

Victor Cha: So this is Victor. I mean, so I think the reason is because both sides are – you know, I agree that I think President Moon, in – with less than a year left in office and still very much committed to, you know, inter-Korean peace, will want to try to move forthright on North Korea. But I think at the same time there's a reality on both sides that – you know, North Korea's shut down because of COVID. They're not really interested and they're not returning phone calls. You know, they're not really interested in any sort of return to the table right now. And so – and so I think it would be a victory if the Biden administration could convince Moon not to try to pigeonhole the president and try to make him say something about a peace declaration, as Roh Moo-hyun – (laughs) – did to George Bush at one point, and to say that, you know, they've consulted closely on the policy review and that they're waiting – they're ready for some sort of engagement, keep on the sanctions, and then, you know, see when the North Koreans are ready to talk.

Because, like I said, I think for – you know, the North Korea issue will forever be the North Korea issue, but there are other issues perhaps for the first time in a long time in this – in this U.S.-ROK summit that are – that are quite important, you know, having to do with Biden's build back better agenda, including – that has to do with climate, energy, supply chains, and

global health. So, you know, in a sense these are going to become really the key issues, and the North Korea issue may sit as a constant in this summit.

Sue Mi Terry: And if I could just add to – this is Sue – to what Victor just said, you know, to many of us, just to sort of – to understand Biden administration’s North Korea policy review, there’s not a whole lot of detail with that. When they say they are trying to strike a balance between strategic patience and grand bargain, finding a third way, and practical approach, and all that, all of that sounds very logical in theory – why not pursue an agreement that at least attempts to limit the program, nuclear and missile program – but in practice and in reality I think the Biden administration understands that this is not going to lead to any kind of breakthrough, right? They understand this.

So I – you know, to me – and I said this – I had a conversation earlier with Victor, but I – to me, this seems like this policy is designed as a holding action so they can say they are doing something on North Korea while they’re concentrating on other things that they feel are more pressing, right – China, global warming, you know, building back better, and all that. So in practical terms, this policy review, what this says about North Korea policy, as I said, there’s just not going to be a significant breakthrough. And I think the Biden administration knows that.

H. Andrew Schwartz: Operator, we’ll take the next question.

Operator: Very good. It’s the line of Abraham Mahshie with The Washington Examiner. Please go ahead.

Q: Yeah, hi. Can you guys hear me all right?

Victor Cha: Yeah.

Q: All right. Terrific. Thanks.

So my question is about – is from a defense perspective. Is it vital that training be fully restored to the pre-Trump pullback/cancellations, that type of thing? And then, also, what could you – what’s the best that you could expect Korea to do in terms of moving closer to the U.S. policy in terms of China deterrence? Thanks a lot.

Michael J. Green: On the training, this – you’re talking about the U.S.-ROK regularly scheduled series of exercises that range from tabletop and computer exercises to large deployments of military personnel and live-fire exercises?

Q: Right, and how Trump unilaterally scaled back.

Michael J. Green: Yeah. So you know, President Trump announced with Kim Jong-un at his side, without any consultation with his own Pentagon or the allies, based on a suggestion from Vladimir Putin – (laughs) – that we would unilaterally stop what he called war games, when war games is what – that’s the term North Korea uses to describe our military exercises. And it was a pretty big blow to the confidence of U.S. allies, but it was also a blow to readiness. And I think senior military officers were obviously loath to undercut the president by saying much about it. But reading between the tea leaves you could see that they saw a degradation of U.S. readiness resulting over time. And it’s been now two years-plus.

So the answer is yes. Resumption of exercises is important. Is deterrence failing because we’re not doing exercises? No, I wouldn’t say that. Our forces are quite ready, very capable. So are the ROK’s. We have a combined – joint combined command, and war plans that have been exercised and tested. So but, you know, it’s a little bit like, you know, a professional football team that’s really, really good but has to scale back practice to three days a week kind of thing. So it definitely matters. I wouldn’t say it’s going to result in a failure of deterrence.

And then on the – what could Korea do, this is my proposal, if you will. The Quad and the free and open Indo-Pacific concept are not about containing China. They’re about reinforcing the rest of Asia to be more resilient against natural disasters, pandemics, and also Chinese coercion and pressure. So what the U.S., Australia, Japan, India, and others, the Europeans, have done is capacity building, helping countries – smaller countries get more patrol boats, better radar so they can see what’s happening. COVID vaccinations and support for that, infrastructure financing so there’s an alternative to China’s Belt and Road. Not saying don’t do China’s Belt and Road, but offering some competition, so China has to earn it. And democracy, governance, women’s empowerment work.

Korea does all of that – all of it – in Asia. But it does it all unilaterally, on its own. It doesn’t do it – it coordinates now with the U.S. more, but it doesn’t do it with Britain, Canada, Australia, Japan, India. So it’s a very, very rich menu. And I think President Moon would get a lot of points, not only in Washington but around the region, by saying we’re going to do more together with Australia, the U.S., and Japan on infrastructure financing. We’re going to send patrol planes to the next Malabar Exercise with the Indians. And we’re going to have a summit – I’m making this up, by the way – we’re going to have a summit to talk about how to enhance good governance and women’s empowerment, which KOICA, our aid agency, JICA, USAID, all do.

There’s a lot, I think, on the menu that are not about containing China, or stopping China, or threatening China. And the problem for Seoul is if it’s too

afraid to do any of those, which are public goods, how will China view that when there are hard decisions that Korea has to make? So I think a lot of us worry that Beijing may interpret the hesitancy to even do those kinds of things as a temptation for China to think that pressure will work. And I think a lot of strategic thinkers in Seoul are beginning to worry about that. So there's a pretty big menu for Moon to choose from, where Korea's already doing great work. And that's what I would hope to see. I know that's what a lot of people in the administration are trying to – not necessarily the ones I said but trying to get Korea to show that it's part of the team for a free and open Indo-Pacific, not to contain or decouple from China.

Q: Great. Thanks so much.

Operator: And we have no other questions. You may continue.

H. Andrew Schwartz: Operator, if we have no more questions, we can conclude the briefing. Just ask around for questions one more time.

Operator: (Gives queuing instructions.)

And no questions.

H. Andrew Schwartz: Thank you very much. Colleagues, appreciate your time today on this briefing. We will have a transcript of it out by early – I guess by close of business today. And it will be posted on the CSIS website. And those of you who RSVPed will also be sent it via email. Thank you very much for your time today. We appreciate it. If any of you have questions for our experts that you want to talk with them one-on-one, please contact me and Caleb Diamond at CSIS.

Operator, thank you. That concludes the briefing for today.

(END)