

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Online Event

**“ROK-U.S. Strategic Forum 2021: The Road Ahead after  
the Biden-Moon Summit”**

***Session I – U.S.-China Competition and the Alliance: To  
Hedge or to Choose?***

DATE

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FEATURING

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Mark Lippert:

All right, everybody. Good morning to those in Washington. Good evening to those in Korea. Good day to those around the world. Welcome to Session I of this excellent conference that's already underway with a couple of rousing speeches, great Q&A, to get us ready for our first expert panel.

We're a little behind. So we are going to make up some time by skimming over some of the biographies. But don't let the brevity detract from their importance and really impeccable credentials. It is an amazing group.

With that, I'm just going to get right into the substance of the panel. This panel is about U.S.-China competition and the alliance, to hedge or to choose. Maybe, perhaps, the panelists will talk about how that, perhaps, is a false choice. I don't know. We're going to get into that.

But, essentially, with secondary states and the international system being confronted with less hedge space and zero-sum binary choices in an era of U.S.-China strategic competition, how do U.S. allies assess policy decisions? Under what conditions do they hedge, align with the U.S., or accommodate China, and what is the impact of this competition for broader stability in East Asia?

As I mentioned, a fantastic panel to get us rolling here and I'm going to, again, breeze through their bios. Here we go. Dr. Evan Medeiros, Penner Family Chair in Asian Studies at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He also served in the White House as the senior director under President Obama. Long history at RAND as well and received his Ph.D. in international relations from the London School of Economics.

Next up, the Honorable Randall G. Schriver, chairman of the board of Project 2049 Institute and partner at Pacific Solutions, LLC, former assistant secretary of defense for Asia at the Pentagon, former deputy assistant secretary of state. Also served as a founding partner of Armitage International, served as an intelligence officer in the United States Navy, attaché at U.S. Embassy Beijing and U.S. Embassy Ulaanbaatar. B.A. from Williams and a master's degree from Harvard University.

Next up, Professor Joon-hyung Kim, professor in the International Studies Department at Handong University where he also served as the chancellor of the Korean National Diplomatic Academy. Invited to George Mason as a Fulbright visiting scholar and a whole host of other impressive work on peace, unification, all of these issues that this panel and this conference will discuss here today. Received his B.A. from Yonsei University and his M.A. and Ph.D. at GW – George Washington University. I'm sorry about that.

Next up, Sangyoon Ma, professor of International Relations at Catholic University of Korea. He was director-general for strategy at the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea from '16 to '19. Formerly held positions as visiting scholar at Brookings, public policy scholar at Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, intelligence officer in the ROK Air Force. B.A. and M.A. international relations at Seoul National University and then as a Swire Scholar continued study of international relations at St. Anthony's College, Oxford University, where he received his Ph.D. degree.

All right. Last but, certainly, not least, Sohn In-joo, professor, Department of Political Science at – and international relations, rather – and international relations, excuse me, at Seoul National University, visiting professor University of Tokyo, director of the Institute of China Studies at Seoul National University, and a host of very interesting academic work and credentials. Served also as a consultant for the Intergovernmental Group of 24 at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. His work has appeared in numerous journals, received his Ph.D. from George Washington University and his B.A. from Seoul National University.

Welcome to the conference, all of our participants, and I am virtual. You are all there. The last time I did this I was in person and everybody was on a screen, and I talked to an empty room full of a screen so I made the wrong call again. Someday I'll get the right memo and we'll do this right. But hey, what the heck. I'm in my living room with my Basset hound. So life's good.

All right. Let's get into the – let's get into the conference here. Really, really great panelists, as I said. Really great subject. I'm going to turn to Dr. Medeiros first to level set here and just ask him a broad question, where things are heading in the U.S.-China relationship. We've got this really important virtual session tonight between the two leaders – President Biden, Xi Jinping – and so topical as well, the impact to the allies, impacts in the region.

Dr. Medeiros, broad strokes here to get us going. The floor is yours.

Evan Medeiros: Well, Ambassador Lippert, thank you very much. I think you missed your calling. You are, of course, a wonderful ambassador but it sounds like you'd be an even better sports broadcaster. (Laughter.) So I look forward to the sort of play-by-play approach to this panel.

In terms of the U.S.-China relationship, now is a great time to be looking at it, not simply because Xi Jinping and President Biden are going to meet for the first time as counterparts but, more broadly, because the relationship is fundamentally changing in its character, and I want to make two points today about what that means for the U.S.-ROK relationship.

Point number one is in the broad arc of the U.S.-China relationship, so since normalization in '79, I think we're heading into a period that I consider to be

a terra incognita. In other words, we're entering into a period where strategic competition is expanding, it's intensifying, and it's diversifying.

We're entering into a period in which the scope and the character of competition is really about to accelerate in significant ways. There is broad spectrum competition between the United States and China. In other words, we compete on security issues, on economic issues, on issues of technology, and even on issues of ideology.

Now, of course, security, competition, and economic competition is not new, but it's broadening and intensifying. And unlike during the Cold War, these four areas of competition now bleed together. Security competition has economic dimensions. Economic competition has security manifestations. Questions of ideological competition are expressed in terms of global governance and technology.

So, in other words, all of these four issues are intertwined with one another, which makes it much more difficult to compartmentalize and, ultimately, manage them. But the fact that the relationship is becoming more competitive is part of the story. There's an additional part of it, which is both sides are now actively using risk and friction. They tolerate it. They use it in the relationship.

Both sides are using much more confrontational strategies. They're tolerating confrontation in the relationship more, and I think that that leads to not only a greater degree of differences but also more volatility in the relationship and I think we should expect that, going forward.

A final point I want to make about competition is the fact that the domestic politics behind it are changing in both sides and I think that's only going to make the competitive dimensions of the relationship a greater challenge to manage. In fact, I think that we may be entering an era of the relationship in which domestic politics more than geopolitics – in other words, the relative position of each country in the international system – influences the U.S.-China relationship.

In the United States, you see a fairly rapid deterioration in public opinion. Unfavorability toward China is at an all-time high among both elites and the public. You have strong bipartisan support within the Congress for more active measures to support competitive strategies toward China. China has alienated key parts of U.S. society – the business community, the media, certainly, civil society after the implementation of the NGO law, and even universities who have to think much more systematically about China risk and China exposure.

So the domestic politics are changing in the United States and, similarly, the domestic politics of China's America policy are changing. Xi Jinping has centralized decision-making so much around him that it's unclear whether or not he and his advisors fully appreciate how they've alienated other countries with their aggressive and assertive policies.

You see nationalism spiking in China. There's a strong sense of indignation in China. The domestic dimensions of China's competitive strategies are coming to the fore, as reflected in things like the fourteenth Five-Year Plan passed earlier this year in which the Chinese are starting to reengineer the composition of their economy to take account of a much more complicated external geopolitical environment.

So the domestic dimensions of the competition are changing in important ways that I think will complicate and narrow the ability of America and the ability of China to manage this terra incognita that I talked about.

Second point, what does this mean for allies and partners? And sort of the way I think about it is we've entered a new era in which what happens in the U.S.-China relationship no longer stays in the U.S.-China relationship. It's sort of the opposite of the Vegas rules, so to speak.

And what I mean by that is as the competition intensifies, because China has such a global economic footprint, because it is becoming more important to the security and the politics of countries all over the world – China is present and influential in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and in Europe – so what that means is that as the U.S.-China competition intensifies and manifests in those four baskets I talked about that the pressures on other regions, other parts of the world where the U.S. has strong allies and partners, the impact on them is going to be more acute.

And so what I think about is that the trade-offs for allies and partners are going to be more frequent, the trade-offs are going to be on a broader set of issues, the trade-offs could also be more costly, and then the Chinese are actively sort of exploring the boundaries of those alliances and those partnerships to see what risks countries are willing to run, what costs they're willing to pay, as the U.S.-China relationship heats up.

As a former policymaker, a question that I used to get all the time is, is America going to ask us to choose between the United States and China? I think that we should now reverse that question and ask countries what are you going to do when China asks you to choose between the United States and China?

Because what I see is as China has become more capable and more confident that China is increasingly asking countries to choose. I would note, in

particular, as a closing point, an excellent piece of research that Professor Cha did about a year ago where he looked at the binary choices that both Australia has faced and South Korea has faced as the U.S.-China competition has heated up.

And so I think that's an excellent piece of research because it points to the diversity of decisions countries face, whether it's speaking out on Hong Kong, supporting the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, supporting the BRI. And whether these choices are binary or not we could argue about, but, nonetheless, there are going to be more of these pressure points countries are going to face.

And I think from an American perspective is if I was a policymaker, I think the United States needs to think a little bit more systematically about which decisions speak to the strategic alignment, strategic orientation, of a country, right. You know, does South Korea's unwillingness to speak vocally about the crackdown on Hong Kong, does that really affect the U.S.-ROK alignment, whereas its position on BRI and AIIB, you know, and, certainly, on issues like North Korea, you know, may speak more to issues of alignment.

Final point that I'll close on, Ambassador Lippert, is, you know, in answering this question, you know, how do you avoid – how do countries avoid having to choose between the United States and China, and I think the way increasingly our allies and partners need to think about it is that in order to avoid having to choose, right, having to face that sort of dramatic decision of aligning with China or aligning with the United States, I think in order to avoid the grand strategic choice, countries are going to have to make some choices. In other words, have to think in advance before we get to a crisis.

So in order to avoid having to choose, countries are going to have to think about making some choices, you know, about things like 5G in order to avoid some grand strategic moment in the future. But, nonetheless, my broader point is what happens in the U.S.-China relationship no longer stays in the relationship, and I think the kind of trade-offs that countries are going to face are going to be more frequent, they're going to be broader, and be more costly.

Over to you, Ambassador Lippert.

Mr. Lippert:

All right. Thanks, Dr. Medeiros. Really appreciate the outstanding intervention and the comments about being a sports commentator. Dare to dream, KBO sportscaster in my future.

All right. Let's go to Professor Sohn to follow up on Dr. Medeiros' comments that really set the stage well for your expertise, Dr. Sohn. You are a deep

expert in China. Let's pull on one thread that Dr. Medeiros – Dr. Medeiros mentioned, the objectives of Beijing in their relationship towards Seoul.

Are they forcing the Koreans to choose? I think that's one. And then the other question is just general thoughts on where this relationship is between Seoul and Beijing. You heard the vice foreign minister talk about a partnership, talk about a good working relationship.

Professor, you're a deep expert in this area. The floor is yours.

Sohn In-Joo:

OK. First of all, thank you very much for your kind introduction, Ambassador, and I extend my thanks to CSIS and the Korea Foundation for organizing a wonderful event.

Let me start with your second question, where are things in the bilateral relations. My takeaway point is South Korea and China, they need to accept open-minded pessimism about bilateral relations in the near future. I think two country have entered a new and more complicated stage in terms of three important developments.

First, the dynamics I want to touch on is the heightened sense of economic vulnerability and security, and that is, you know, South Korea and U.S. find that some elements of today's U.S.-China's trade competition may lead to some change in the global supply chain – global supply chain and global value chain.

So it is, consequently, in Beijing and Seoul there's growing sense of uncertainty about possible decoupling or partial coupling or complementary recoupling with Chinese economy. And on top of that, both Beijing and Seoul are keenly aware of the risk of what is called economic interdependence, weaponized interdependence, which means the manipulating or abusing the economic dependence to achieve a narrative and separate interest.

So these new dynamics heighten the – deepen a sense of the vulnerability and are starting to undermine market-driven trade, market-driven economic integration between two countries.

My second point is about the decline of positive feelings in the Sino-South Korea mutual perception. And on the Chinese side, a lot of reports and news media suggest that the Chinese public's perception towards South Korea has – it worsened over the past decade.

Likewise, on the Korea there's anti-China sentiments running high that's well reported. So this sort of increasing negative trend and mutual perception will become a stumbling block to the future bilateral relations.

My third point is about the domestic politics, especially elite politics, in two countries, and the leadership in two countries have been preoccupied with domestic challenges and domestic issues. And in China, Chinese leaders are, you know, pretty much obsessed with the – dealing with domestic problems in a quite repressed manner, and also things appears to be having geared toward the – President Xi Jinping's – the consolidation of his power and the extension of his tenure as paramount leader next year.

And on the Korean side, South Korea is politically polarizing and facing daunting challenges such as housing bubble, income inequality, youth unemployment. And also I noticed that the domestic issue – as opposed to foreign policy issue, domestic continue to dominate public debates in the run-up to the president election next year.

So my point is the leadership in the two country are not in a good position to afford time, energy, and political capital to do some proactive, creative measure to improve bilateral relations. So, overall, now, the two countries may have to accept the open-minded pessimism about their relations, and I would say the overdose of optimism can be self-defeating.

So, rather, a realistic view can be helpful for maintaining stable relations to country and I would say that nothing is permanent except change. Nothing is permanent except change, which means South Korea, China, went through ebbs and flows, up and downs, over the past three decades. So two country should remain patient, open minded to any change in the future.

The question – first, the question about the – what China really want, what's the objective, we have to start thinking about the Chinese understanding of the U.S.-China competition. And they see the one key nature – elements of the U.S.-China straight competition is resume competition, system competition. For Beijing, the primary concern is the regime resilience, regime survival, so they – Chinese leaders have internal anxiety, and to this China's leadership wants to shape its international environment in favor of Chinese Communist Party staying in power.

To this end, China – Chinese leaders maybe – probably they will try to prevent South Korea from the teaming up to contain or harm China. And also, moreover, I think the Chinese leaders want to neutralize or mitigate South Korea's cultural normative influence over Chinese people. K-Pop, K-Drama, featuring liberal ideas like such as diversity, pluralism, is dangerous. It's sort of a spiritual pollution.

So we have to understand Beijing's concern by its regime resilience in its approach to South Korea and other neighboring countries. That's all.

Mr. Lippert:

All right. Thanks, Professor, for, really, an outstanding intervention in and around the two questions that I posed to you that really built well on Dr. Medeiros' setup and overview.

Let's go next to Professor Ma. And speaking from your experience, Professor, director-general policy planning, talk about the dynamics that these two previous panelists you heard – Dr. Medeiros talked about choices. You talked about structural deterioration in the relationship. You talked – we heard about – Professor Ma (sic; Sohn) talking about open-minded pessimism, you know, preoccupation with domestic concerns, public opinion sliding in both countries, weaponization of the economics.

So lots of complications in the environment in which policymakers in Seoul find themselves in the midst of this relationship. So what is the impact on ROK policymaking especially towards the U.S.-ROK alliance and on issues concerning Beijing?

The floor is yours.

Ma Sangyoon:

All right. Thank you very much for having me here.

During the past 10 years, I think, there has been an increasing number of cases where Korea faces very difficult, you know, situations to make policy decisions among the conflicting pressures from, on the one hand, from Washington and the other hand from Beijing. The current government, I think, under the previous and current administration has sought quite consistently a sort of balanced diplomacy.

This is not an equal distance policy, however. Korea does not aim to be – aim to place itself at the right center, the right geometric center, between the United States and China. To be honest, Korea is tilted more toward United States while it tries to avoid somehow irritating or provoking China, especially with regard to the issues of sovereignty and territorial claims that China think are sensitive.

Korean government officials, including Vice Minister Choi, repeatedly express this position by saying and emphasizing that the United States is Korea's only ally and China is the largest economic and trading partner.

Despite China's rapid rise in the recent decades and some academic observations that there is taking place kind of a power shift or hegemonic shift from the United States toward China, I think most of the Korean officers, policymakers, doesn't want to see, really, the power shift happening. Yet, Korea tries to avoid kind of a friction with China for two well-known reasons.

First, China is the – Korea’s largest economic and trading partner. Our trade volumes – the portions of, you know, trade with China occupies about 25 percent of our total trading volumes. And, in addition, Korea imports a number of items very essential for our economy from China. So that kind of dependence on the trade with China makes us to – makes us very difficult to somehow taking a position to provoke China.

Secondly, the current Korean government seeks China’s active cooperation to jumpstart the Korean peace process. President Moon Jae-in proposed the end-of-the-war declaration among the three parties or four parties and want to utilize the upcoming Beijing Winter Olympic Games as a kind of a diplomatic opportunity.

On the other hand, I’d like to say that Korea seeks cooperation with the U.S.-Indo-Pacific strategy, especially in terms of Korea’s own new Southern Policy. The cooperation is more focused on economic area and social areas, too. But Korea is somehow cautious on defense cooperation, however, especially in a wider region beyond the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea seeks to enhance its own defense capacity, however, in close consultation with the United States. It is noteworthy, I think, in a recent report by – that the CICIR, which is a think tank associated with a Chinese intelligence agency, warned recently that South Korea’s enhanced defense capabilities in areas like missiles and submarines would play disadvantageously for China in its strategic competition with United States.

I think this testifies how Korean, you know, policy and positions is somehow navigating narrow waters between rocks and hard place. Thank you.

Mr. Lippert: All right. Thank you, Professor. Really excellent insights.

Can I just follow up on one point, just draw you out just a little bit more? It was on your last point that you made about the wider regional, I guess, cooperation engagement by Seoul in the Indo-Pacific.

How about values? There’s been a lot of talk on democracy, human rights, rule of law. You have Taiwan referenced in the joint statement that accompanied the summit between the two leaders just this spring. There’s been, obviously, an ongoing conversation for many years between the United States and South Korea on the South China Sea. You touched on that a little bit. But any further comments on that basket of issues?

Dr. Ma: Well, on those issues, which might relate to the values or value diplomacy, I think Korean government has been a little bit less concerned with those issues, the causes of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. This is partly because of the concern that we have not irritating China too much.

Probably we may have opportunities to discuss later in this round of discussion, I think.

Korea, I think, needs to take a more principled approach or position reflecting its own identity as a liberal democracy or as a trading nation that Vice Minister Choi touched upon in his previous addresses. Well, Korea's own political and economic development owes greatly to the existence of the liberal international order and that testifies that Korea needs and has an interest, a very significant interest, to preserve that kind of international order for that freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and free trade regimes in the world, and human rights, democracy, I think, those are all issues that really matters for Korean interests. Thank you.

Mr. Lippert: Well put. Thanks, Professor. Excellent comeback there and appreciate the comments, especially about the rules-based international order and its nexus to the trading nation status of the Republic of Korea or the emphasis that the Republic of Korea places on being a trading nation.

Let's come to Professor Kim, and let's bring this back to the Peninsula. It dovetails a bit with the Q&A session with the vice foreign minister, where we had a lot of conversation about China. But the vice minister kept bringing this back into the peninsular context and the North Korea relationship as well as kind of a driver.

So let's – and the reason we bring this back is because of your expertise on North Korea, but the impact of all of this on DPRK itself, machinations in Pyongyang, and Seoul's DPRK policy and as well as the alliance posture towards DPRK policy, especially given the competition of two key members, U.S. and China, that hold seats at the Security Council and are essential for virtually any multilateral configuration on the DPRK issue – four-party, six-party, et cetera.

Professor, comments on this basket of issues? And the floor is yours.

Kim Joon-Hyung: OK. Thank you very much. I'm honored to be one of this wonderful panel. And especially, Ambassador Lippert, as I – if I remember correctly you are Doosan's supporter, right? They're losing now. So I hope they win over. It's not – it's not –

Mr. Lippert: I'm not happy. I'm not happy. They're down 2-0, you know.

Dr. Kim: Korean Series is going. Anyways, yes, I'm relieved, like, a few months ago from a government official job, so I'm enjoying the civilian life afterwards.

Yeah, it's really strategic questions for Koreans' survival – Korean, you know, both North and South. Let me start with introducing my episode of when I met North Korean Foreign Ministry people back in March 2018.

The time is very delicate at the time because, you know, it's after announcement of inter-Korean summit and U.S.-North Korean summit decided. Somehow, this trilateral 1.5 strategic dialogue in Helsinki, Finland. After three days, we talked a lot and as – informally – and I asked so many questions that I, you know, have, you know, in the long time. And I asked him: What do you think about China? China is your plan A to be – to survive in the coming – if your regime have difficulties? He said – definitely, he said, no, our plan A is U.S. The plan B is China.

We want to have good relations with the U.S. because they have something regarding – it deeply related to our survival. But if you push us too much to the corner, then we have no choice but to hang on China. And he challenged me by asking that. Whenever China gets stronger in history, they always have a hard time – gave a hard time to Koreans. I think it's very frank and honest statement. And this is the very episode I heard with – you know, from Kissinger and Kim Kye-gwan's dialogue in New York channel, and they want to have – even want to have some kind of alliance relations with the U.S. I don't think it's just – you know, just kidding or a joke.

The reason why I say is I think it's right now we are at juncture, I think. And the U.S.-China relationship, someone called it strategic paranoia. I know China behaves sometimes, you know, bad violator. They steal technology, But somehow, this strategic competition out of hands. And that means, you know, it's very difficult to Koreans, both Koreans, you know, because we never solved – resolved this division of the peninsula. We couldn't be successful, you know, when the Cold War collapsed.

You know, Chinese people, they said it's a long war, so even 50 years or a hundred years but they can endure. They say they will win, but they can endure. But physically, geopolitically, you know, this East Asia is the battlefield. I don't think they are going to the war, but somehow they weren't so tested each other, so this fault line from Korean Peninsula and the East China Sea and Taiwan Strait and South China Sea.

I think, you know, Taiwan Strait is most dangerous spot, but if somebody, you know, like, a military clash, that's the end of it. So I don't think it's really useful, in my opinion. But the Korean Peninsula is the one that U.S. and China can take advantage of to warn or to test the other side. So that's really a worry.

And another one is, you know, in a way, Korean government, especially progressive government, is trying to balance. You know, this divisive frame

is going on now – you know, always was there. You know, pro-China, pro-North, progressive, same category. Pro-U.S., you know, and anti-China, anti-North Korea, always on the same side, and it's still going on.

But somehow progressive government like a Moon government tried to balance, you know, even if, you know, there's criticism by the pro-China. I know that is going on a very deep conversation dialogue between Beijing and Seoul. Even – you know, everybody's talking about this domestic cost of foreign policy is rising but somehow they try to maintain, be rational even in election time, and even after the sanction by China. Everybody – you know, more than 80 percent anti-China feelings, but still. And in many people it's just the same questions: How can we choose China over U.S.? So why don't we choose now, you know, U.S. over China? This is – it's almost consensus among people.

But that's not easy. You know, 30 percent dependence on trade. Decoupling is necessary. We tried to decouple, you know, with the Chinese economy since the THAAD incident. Some success cases, but still going back to – actually went back to, like, almost 30 percent again. It's going to take time and needs a very careful approach. So it's not easy for us, too.

Yeah, definitely, I don't think it's really strategic ambiguity, you know, our government trying to hold on. It's not pure balance. We all know that. Fundamental basis, of course, U.S.-ROK alliance, but we don't want to damage – critically damage Korea-China relationship.

So and let me conclude my comment. So we have a choice. People say, are you plan A – what's South Korea's plan A? Plan A, of course, U.S. Then plan B is China? No. No way. You know, our plan B is actually the U.S. and multilateralism. So, definitely, alliance is our number-one policy but it has to be complemented by – supplement by multilateralism.

But these days, you know, multilateralism inside the one bloc, in a bloc situation, is not a very good idea. Now, Quad, Indo-Pacific, and Five Eyes, we have a good working relationship. But joining as a member is a different story. And one more thing is we tried to build some kind of crossover multilateral kind of organization or institutions with EU, with ASEAN, so-called we call the third region, third zone.

I'll stop here. Thank you very much.

Mr. Lippert:

Professor, outstanding intervention and you really covered the landscape on the themes of ROK in terms of strategic competition between the U.S. and China.

Just let me follow up and ask – re-ask the question that I put in the original question to you. Just a little bit – if you don't mind, just a couple minutes on North Korea. We've – I just wanted to factor that in. You touched on it a little bit. But, obviously, it looms large in South Korean policymaking.

China has a Security Council seat. There's elements in the multilateral conversations, if they ever get going again, with North Korea. How does that play into these thoughts you had in terms of leverage the Chinese may have politically on the South Koreans or impact on South Korean policymaking? Your thoughts there, quickly, and then we'll go to Mr. Schriver.

Dr. Kim: OK. I think, you know, original goal is to try to, you know, make this multilateralism more on the policy agenda. But somehow, because of they're all mesmerized by this North Korean issue, like, early beginning year of his policy, and this Southern Policy and Northern Policy, and another, you know, obstacle was the pandemic. So I don't think it really materialized as he intended to do that, but bottom line is like that.

And he always have to defend himself. He's not really, you know, destabilizer of the alliance. He tries so hard, you know, tell people in Korea and the U.S. he's not the type that many, you know, conservatives framed.

Mr. Lippert: OK. Thank you. Excellent. All right.

Mr. Schriver, you've been waiting a little while. We appreciate the patience. But, you know, you're the cleanup hitter. You're the Kim Jae-hwan of the conference. That's Doosan's cleanup hitter. So let's stick with the baseball analogy here.

You heard some very interesting comments along the way about decoupling the domestic issues in South Korea, that it's not equidistant in terms of a hedge between the United States and China that the Koreans are running.

The multilateral peace, southern strategy, this comes right into your wheelhouse, especially as former assistant secretary of defense at DOD where you had a regional lens and were charged with a lot of alliance management, among other duties.

But talk about these dynamics in terms of the impact in Korea, alliances more generally, and then thoughts about how the United States might play into these trends in a way that brings allies and partners closer to us versus further away, Mr. Schriver, and any other comments you might want to make, too, on the preceding interventions because that's the distinction you have as the cleanup hitter. You can hit any pitch you want, and I'll stop there.

Randall G.  
Schriver:

Great. Well, thanks, Ambassador Lippert. Appreciate you moderating this panel, and thank you to CSIS and the Korea Foundation and for my colleagues, who've already made excellent comments.

Look, I think for the United States and the region we've been on a trajectory for a longer period than some people acknowledge or maybe even understand. I actually think, and I've said this many times, the Trump administration was more evolutionary than revolutionary and that, in fact, the basic foundation for our move into the Pacific where we prioritized alliances, where we thought about posture, where we thought about competition with China, all of that really began during the pivot or the rebalance that, Mark, you were so critical in helping conceive of and develop, and Evan as well.

And, really, you know, if you look at – I don't have to tell you guys because you guys came up with it, but 60 percent of our naval forces in the strategic guidance that the Obama administration put out in the Pacific, the prioritization and modernization of alliances and so on and so forth, all of this was laid in the Obama administration and then, I think, further during the Trump administration, and now, I think, we see a lot of continuity in the Biden administration.

I make this point because even though, certainly, President Trump had a difference in style and personality and tone, I think we've been on this trajectory of adopting a more competitive posture vis-à-vis China for quite some time, and it was really driven by interest, by China's behavior and their, really, aspirations to undermine the free and open order that we've all benefited so much from.

So this gets to your question about alliance management. I think our alliance discussions have also evolved and matured along the way where, particularly, behind closed doors we're able to have very frank and candid discussions about where we see the future challenges and what our expectations may be of our respective alliances and respective minilateral and multilateral organizations.

So I think this has been a fairly smooth evolutionary process up until recently where, I think, the competition is intensifying. And so when we talk about choices, sometimes I'm a little uncomfortable even with the – you know, the titles of sessions like this, whether or not to choose or hedge or choose.

Well, for goodness sake, hopefully, we've made a choice of some kind that we're allies and we share values and there's sort of a foundational view of what's important. But when we would go around the region we found a lot

of receptivity not to choosing Washington over Beijing but can you choose protection of your sovereignty.

Can you choose free fair reciprocal trade? Can you choose peaceful dispute resolution? Can you choose international norms and standards? Can you choose a particular approach to a regional order which is characterized by the free and open qualities?

Now, obviously, I'm not – no spoiler alert here – if you choose all those things, we're pretty confident you'll be in our camp. But the choices are going to become more stark and pointed and people will be, I think, further exposed, if you will.

I've never thought that people didn't want to choose, and people don't generally want to choose in public and they don't generally want to choose in a way that appears confrontational to China because we all have a lot of stake in the China relationship.

But in terms of choosing those values, those norms, those standards, I've always felt very comfortable that we've got momentum. We've got a coalition of countries that far outweigh countries that want a different kind of regional order or a different kind of deferential relationship with China. So I'm pretty confident about it, and I'm bullish on the U.S.-ROK relationship and alliance, going into the future. But there are some risks.

Look, the Biden administration is attempting to pull something off that's very difficult. We're going to learn a little more, maybe tonight after the phone call, although I've seen a very aggressive ploy at dampening expectations, which is always – you know, I had pretty low expectations going in already. But we've been assured there will be no deliverables and we shouldn't have high expectations for this first meeting.

But, really, what I think they're trying to do is achieve a new sort of steady state. They talk about common sense guardrails. They talk about trying to insulate certain areas of cooperation. Certainly, we've seen Mr. Kerry's efforts related to climate change. I think we'll hear more about some of the other efforts, maybe even something related to the Korean Peninsula. So try to achieve a new normal but a steady state where competition is the defining quality of the relationship. But we do have these so-called common sense guardrails and we have these insulated and protected areas of cooperation.

I don't think it's going to work, and I don't think it's going to work because a point that Evan made, which I thought was an excellent point, the Chinese are willing to accept more friction. They're using coercion and military tools in order to try to drive outcomes. That will make it very difficult to have a steady state that is not very dangerous and risky.

I think it will also fail for a number of other reasons and it relates to, you know, values and interests. There are certain things that are just going to be hard to ignore. We can go and have a normal Olympics but it's pretty hard to ignore ongoing genocide, which is happening in Xinjiang right now – two administrations in a row have acknowledged that – and nor should we ignore genocide. This should be factored into our relationship.

And when our Chinese counterparts say they want a relationship based on mutual respect, they want a relationship characterized by win-win cooperation, what they really mean is they want us to refrain from any criticism whatsoever of their actions, particularly what they deem internal policy matters, and that we avoid irritants, and this will be very, very tricky to navigate.

So, going forward, and let me speak specifically about the U.S.-ROK alliance, I think there's really sort of two risks. And let me chapeau this again by saying I am bullish on this and I think we'll manage this all effectively and we'll come out the other side stronger but, really, two risks, and they've sort of been addressed in one form or another so far.

But one is that we have a near-term crisis that we're not prepared for as an alliance and I think, certainly, something could happen in the Taiwan Strait. I'm not of the view that China is anxious for a fight and that they're planning a near-term invasion. But, certainly, the level of flight activity, surface activity, in and around Taiwan raises the risk for all of us of an unintended incident or a crisis that escalates.

What have our friends in Seoul thought through what that means for them? Have we thought through what that means for an alliance? I suspect not thoroughly enough, because sometimes we respect these topics as taboo topics and we don't go deep enough. But I can't think of anything worse for the alliance than a crisis of that nature that we're unprepared for, caught off guard for.

So I think whatever needs to be done behind closed doors, whether that's our ROK allies having conversations among themselves and gaming through what a crisis like that might mean or even, I think, more appropriately and valuable would be an alliance discussion about certain hotspots and what it would mean for the alliance should there be a crisis of that nature.

The second risk is, really, more difficult and long term in nature and that is that this divergence that we may have on views of China and the regional order and how much deference to show to China in favor of maintaining normal trade relations, that that divergence will cause a drift that, over time, we'll find ourselves 10, 15, 20 years from now with a diminished alliance.

Not that the affinity would be gone, not that the history always remains and that we would have many shared interests, but, look, China is the organizing principle for the Department of Defense right now as defined by the previous National Defense Strategy and that's been endorsed by the new administration.

You can't have an alliance where one side views something as the primary important challenge, the organizing principle, and the other side doesn't embrace that without some loss of relevance over time. And if that's the drift we're on, that's also equally dangerous, in a way, because, again, we'll be sort of diminished and less relevant over time and that's not where we want to be.

So we need to be vigilant about evolving. I like the – it was interesting, the 1st vice minister's comments. He gave a speech and didn't mention China, but he talked a lot about evolving and adapting and doing what we need to do to keep relevance. So I think that's really the challenge that I took away from that speech, and we have to have the China challenge as a part of that discussion.

There, certainly, will be perturbations along the way, but Korea does not want to be France in the AUKUS equation, right. France was treated the way they were treated mostly because they, frankly, were overlooked and that key decision-makers didn't give full proper consideration for their role in the Pacific, their partnership with us.

We don't want to find ourselves at a point where we're making decisions about our strategic relationship – pardon me, our strategic competition with China that sort of overlooks or forgets the importance of Korea, and that can come in a number of forms.

And by the way, there are some near-term risks there, too. I hope if the administration is seriously considering a no-first-use declaration, which I think would be a horrible idea, I hope we think about fully what that means for extended deterrence and what that means for our alliance with the ROK and others.

But the point is we don't want to sort of slide into a diminished state because of this divergence, and we need to address it head on earlier so that we don't sort of wake up 10, 15 years later with a less relevant alliance.

Mr. Lippert:

OK, Randy. Thanks. A really outstanding intervention. Let me just come back for a one-minute follow-up because we're, basically, out of time. But your thoughts on, going forward, given some of the risks you outlined, number one.

Number two, I think what I would characterize as some of the structural friction that you think will lead to at least a look at a different approach in the near future, and then this danger of being, I guess you'd sort of say, overlooked – those three issues.

And I would just, for the record, point out that in just a few years back the Koreans were seeking cooperation on nuclear submarines, right – the AUKUS piece. There's an interesting lens there.

Randy, thoughts on how we manage this tiny question in about a minute.

Mr. Schriver: Well, again, I agree with the point Evan made. And I don't mean to make you feel uncomfortable, a Trump appointee agreeing so much with you, Evan. But he talked about finding the areas of cooperation that really have more significant strategic significance rather than maybe some of the other areas.

And I do think, as uncomfortable as it is for all of us, we are not going to be able to maintain normal sort of status quo trade and economic relations with China, going forward. We're not. And I think where it's coming to a head first is on technology, and I think the combination of China's aggressive efforts to steal it, pirate it, but also the program of military-civil fusion in that seemingly commercial activities are really benefiting – ultimately, benefiting the PLA through the civil-military fusion efforts.

That means we've got to tighten up. So it's supply chain for our own protection so there's diversification there so we have reliable suppliers of critical technologies. But more and more, it's about protection of technologies. It's about identifying the choke points that are important to China so that we understand where we have leverage. But this is not going to be a normal trade relationship, going forward.

In the U.S., we're going to start to look at capital flows, which is sort of the untouched 800-pound gorilla. We've put these tariffs in place. We've talked about entities lists. But still, the capital is flowing to China at unprecedented levels. That's not going to continue. And so for us to have, I think, an approach to the overall China challenge that is really optimal we've got to start talking about these hard economic questions first.

Mr. Lippert: All right. Thanks, Randy. We're about to gavel down.

Evan, you were brought into this. One minute to you to respond. Closing thoughts, then we're going to gavel and get on with the rest of the show.

Dr. Medeiros: So I will foot stomp Randy's point, which is one of in order for the alliance to continue we really have to stay aligned on the China challenge. When 1st

Vice Minister Choi was giving his speech he said, let's talk about the 800-pound elephant in the room. And I thought he was about to say China, and I was, like, great. They get it. And, of course, he talked about Korea.

So I think all of the risks that Randy highlighted are really spot on. I hope the U.S. and the ROK, at a government-to-government level, have a very special, quiet, nonpublic channel for beginning to coordinate perceptions, assessments, strategies, and policies on China.

That's what's needed, because whether it's through the channel of a crisis or drift, I think that there are real serious risks that need to be attended to because, as other commentators have pointed to, the Chinese strategy is one of either neutralizing or Finlandizing South Korea. That's what they want. Diminish the role of the alliance gradually incrementally over time.

And while it's easy for all of us here that are very focused on the U.S.-ROK alliance and have a lot of experience, I think it's the policymakers at the top of both our systems that don't focus on U.S.-ROK 24/7 that need to be sort of brought into that, and I think that that's going to be an exceptionally important agenda in the future.

Thank you.

Mr. Lippert:

All right. Thanks, Evan.

With that, we are going to gavel down Session I, an outstanding session.

Professor Medeiros, Professor Sohn, Professor Ma, Professor Kim, the Honorable Randy Schriver, thank you all for, really, outstanding comments, insights, counsel. Really, really, really a fast-paced tour de force here.

In closing, I'll just say the takeaways that I had, among others, complex, evolving, involves domestic alliance issues. It's broader in the international context in terms of its impact. It's not equidistant, the distance Seoul is trying to cover between Washington and Beijing. But they're – where we are between 100 percent agreement in Washington and Seoul and being equidistant is still to be determined. And then, finally, values, economics, multilateralism, even cultural – the K-Pop reference by one of the panelists as well – all in play here.

So great session. Thanks again. It really set us up well for the next events here in the conference and, really, fantastic food for thought for all policymakers, academics, and think tank experts around the world.

Thanks again.

