

Secretaries of State and Defense Should Broach Tough Issues During Asia Trip

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Upcoming senior-level meetings with Japan and South Korea provide a chance to affirm the importance of alliances and their role in a broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

The U.S. is stronger when aligned with Indo-Pacific allies and partners, and better positioned to confront the challenge posed by the Chinese Communist Party.

The Administration should work with South Korea and Japan to coordinate strong policy on North Korea, China, and other key issues.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will meet with Japanese and South Korean counterparts to confirm U.S. security commitments to its allies and coordinate policies toward the North Korean and Chinese threats. Tokyo and Seoul perceive the first overseas trip by Biden cabinet members and the rapid resolution of military cost-sharing negotiations as signaling strong U.S. support for the alliances and prioritization of the Indo-Pacific region.

The positive public messaging, however, will mask some policy differences behind the scenes. The U.S. and Japan largely agree on the need to confront growing Chinese maritime assertiveness in the East and South China seas, as well as the increasing North Korean nuclear and missile threats. South Korea, however, is resistant to criticizing Beijing or joining

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib6062>

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coalitions seen as containing China. Seoul advocates additional incentives to encourage North Korea to return to denuclearization negotiations. Both allies may resist U.S. efforts at reconciling difficult historic issues between them that have impeded greater trilateral coordination in addressing regional threats.

Setting a Positive Atmosphere

The Biden Administration's acceptance of significant incremental increases in Japanese and South Korean contributions to offset the cost of stationing American forces overseas and cessation of U.S. threats to reduce troop levels removed a major source of tension in allied relations.¹

The U.S. agreed to Seoul's proposed 13 percent increase in the initial year of a five-year agreement (with subsequent annual increases likely to be 5 percent to 6 percent).² A U.S. official commented it is the largest increase by Seoul since 2004, but still within the historical range of payments from South Korea.³ The agreement with Japan is likely to be along similar lines, and a shift from the previous Administration's request for 500 percent and 400 percent increases, respectively.

Coordinating Policies

The Biden Administration has not yet unveiled its strategies toward North Korea and China, pending completion of internal policy reviews. The upcoming "two-plus-two" meetings provide an opportunity for allied discussion and input. U.S. officials will likely push U.S. allies to do more to oppose North Korean and Chinese challenges to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific, but will likely be hampered by conflicting priorities amongst the allies.

Tokyo will seek strong and unequivocal U.S. commitment to the defense of Japan and reaffirmation that the bilateral security treaty applies to the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands. The U.S. and Japan may release a joint statement explicitly criticizing China's repeated incursions into the territorial waters near the islands and recent Chinese legislation designating its coast guard as a paramilitary organization. Previous U.S.-Japan two-plus-two meetings in 2017 and 2019 expressed concern without specifically naming China.⁴

South Korea will resist efforts to draw it into uncomfortable situations with China or to join an expanded "Quad Plus" organization that could be perceived as an anti-Chinese coalition. Seoul has complained of U.S.

pressure forcing South Korea to choose between Beijing, its largest trading partner, and Washington, its ally and security guarantor. Seoul's earlier willingness to stand up to Chinese threats against deploying the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile defense system in Korea led to extensive damaging boycotts against South Korean businesses.

Despite this apprehension, the U.S. should urge South Korea to play a larger role in the Indo-Pacific, including in ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. South Korea should be reminded that it shares values and principles with the United States and other countries that seek to redress China's intimidating and belligerent behavior and promote a free and open Indo-Pacific.

North Korea

Facing his last year in office, South Korean President Moon Jae-in is increasingly desperate to achieve progress for his signature policy of improving inter-Korean relations. Pyongyang has rejected all South Korean entreaties for dialogue—and even offers of humanitarian assistance.

To jump-start dialogue, Moon advocates resuming unconditional summit diplomacy, reducing sanctions, signing a peace declaration, and offering North Korea massive economic benefits, all while downplaying Pyongyang's human rights conditions, ignoring regime violations of U.N. resolutions, and turning the other cheek to threatening, insulting diatribes against Seoul.

All of these run counter to President Biden's likely North Korea policy. Biden conditioned future summit meetings with North Korea on significant progress at working-level diplomatic meetings toward a denuclearization agreement. The Biden Administration is more likely than Seoul to respond to North Korean violations of U.N. resolutions, criticize regime human rights abuses, and maintain sanctions.

Secretaries Blinken and Austin should counsel South Korean restraint against prematurely offering concessions to North Korea prior to tangible progress on denuclearization or to simply buy its return to negotiations. The allies should publicly affirm that denuclearization remains the required end state of negotiations while privately discussing linkages between North Korean actions and reciprocal benefits.

OPCON Transition

South Korean officials may seek U.S. commitment to complete the return of wartime operational control (OPCON) during President Moon's

term. The Biden Administration should instead continue to emphasize that OPCON transition should occur only when previously agreed upon conditions between Washington and Seoul have been fully met. Defense Secretary Austin should underscore that, while South Korea has made considerable progress in augmenting defense capabilities, Seoul must still address lingering deficiencies.

Final certification requires resumption of large-scale military exercises when COVID-19 conditions allow. South Korean officials have instead advocated continued reduction or elimination of combined military exercises.

Trilateralism

A sensitive topic that Austin and Blinken should nonetheless raise with Japanese and South Korean counterparts is the need to improve bilateral relations between Tokyo and Seoul. Lingering animosity from historic tensions and sovereignty disputes has hindered coordinating contingency security operations and integrating missile defense systems.

The United States has often been reluctant to become directly involved in the bilateral dispute, since it risks appearing to value one ally over the other. However, the degree of deterioration in Japanese–South Korean relations risks undermining U.S. strategic objectives in Northeast Asia.

Recent encouraging signs from Seoul and Tokyo offer some hope for potential progress. Despite the inherent difficulties, Washington must make concerted behind-the-scenes diplomacy as the Obama Administration did to mend strained tensions during a previous flare-up in 2015.

Washington should recommend periodic trilateral cabinet-level (two-plus-two-plus-two) meetings to facilitate greater coordination on foreign and security policies. President Biden should invite President Moon and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga for a trilateral summit meeting, virtually in the near-term, and in-person when COVID-19 conditions allow.

Conclusion

These senior-level meetings provide an opportunity to affirm the importance of the individual alliances as well as to discuss their role in a broader Indo–Pacific strategy. The U.S. should combine strong public messaging with frank and open private discussions with Japan and South Korea.

Coordinating allied policy with Seoul and Tokyo, in conjunction with the March 12 virtual summit meeting of the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.), provides the Biden Administration with a stronger foundation for

the subsequent U.S. meeting with Chinese officials in Alaska on March 18.
The U.S. is stronger when aligned with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific.

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Endnotes

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2. Kang Seung-woo, "Korea to Pay 13.9 Percent More to Host U.S. Troops," *Korea Times*, March 10, 2021, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/03/120_305298.html (accessed March 10, 2021).
3. Michelle Ye Hee Lee, Tweet, <https://twitter.com/myhlee/status/1369642591403278342?s=20> (accessed March 10, 2021).
4. "Japan and U.S. to Single Out China at '2-plus-2' Meeting," *Nikkei Asia*, March 9, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-and-US-to-single-out-China-at-2-plus-2-meeting> (accessed March 10, 2021).