



## Series: America's Choice in 2020

### ③ The U.S.-DPRK Relations

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Although President Trump is not yet conceding, it can be concluded that Biden is elected. What is important now is how Biden's policies will differ from those of the four-year Trump administration. Above all, how different the Biden administration's policy toward North Korea is drawing attention. Many experts said ahead of the election that Biden's election would be advantageous for the ROK-U.S. alliance but that President Trump's re-election would be advantageous for denuclearization negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea. It is necessary to first, analyze internal discussions about the Biden administration's policy, and second, figure out possible directions of the Biden administration's policy toward North Korea.

Concerns about Biden's North Korea policy were found among the ones who study the South Korean government's policies at a relatively close distance. One broadcasting station featured an American as a discussant who said, "It will be difficult to see a summit between the U.S. president and North Korea's chairman, Kim Jong-un." This expert continued, "(Democratic Party's) Biden will follow the foreign policy under President Barack Obama, and the White House will be filled with hawks (hardliners) on North Korea if Biden becomes the U.S. president." Another expert said, "President Trump can talk with Chairman Kim through a direct line but Biden does not have such a line." But this expert added, "The South Korean government may be able to consult with the Biden administration to produce flexible policies." South Korea's National Assembly gave a pessimistic outlook. Some people said, "The U.S. takes a considerable time to form a cabinet and a ministry. As it will take time to form a line-up that can guide and lead North Korea policy and as the U.S. must first deal with urgent domestic issues, North Korea policy may not function properly until the first half of next year." The others continued, "It would take about a year to review

all policies if Biden is elected, and South Korea will waste its precious time.” Several research institutes similarly gave pessimistic outlooks. One institution predicted, “The Biden administration’s early North Korea policy is likely to be tougher than the Trump administration’s current North Korea policy,” and continued, “Biden is unlikely to hold a summit with Kim, since Biden recognizes Kim Jong Un as a ‘dictator,’ ‘tyrant,’ ‘butcher,’ and ‘thug.’” This institution further added, “If Biden is elected as the next U.S. president, he is likely to take a skeptical attitude toward negotiations with North Korea and may rely on stronger pressure and sanctions against North Korea than the current Trump administration.” Another research institute expressed, “There are concerns about possible conflicts between the U.S. and North Korea that may be caused by (the Biden administration’s) return to strategic patience and stress on human rights.” It continued, “If North Korea begins strategic provocations again, the Obama administration’s logic of strategic patience is highly possible to replace the logic of improving the U.S.-DPRK relations and resuming negotiations for denuclearization.”

In a broad sense, there are three main points. The first is the belief that President Trump’s direct negotiation with North Korea’s Kim Jong Un produces better results than Biden’s working-level-negotiation-oriented approach. The second is the thought that Biden’s negative perception of Kim Jong Un will worsen the U.S.-DPRK relations. The third is the observation that the time needed for the Biden administration’s review of the Korean Peninsula policy and building of a line-up will delay negotiations. It is important to take a look at each point.

First, the negative perception of Biden’s bottom-up approach is based on the idea that President Trump met with North Korea’s Kim Jong Un in person and was able to produce practical results. However, during four years of President Trump’s presidency, the Trump administration directly contacted North Korea and progressed denuclearization negotiations only for about a year from the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics to the Hanoi Summit in 2019. It is important to look at the situation in 2017 or after March 2019. In 2017, the U.S. pursued the maximum pressure strategy and maintained a cold manner during the PyeongChang Winter Olympics. After the 2019 Hanoi Summit, President Trump discussed working-level negotiations with Chairman Kim Jong Un at the Panmunjom meeting. Then, a working-level nuclear talk was held in Stockholm in October 2019. However, it ended with no results. This suggests that North Korea’s decision to enter into negotiations, instead of the U.S. policy toward North Korea such as President Trump’s top-down approach, led to negotiations and the improvement of relationship between the U.S. and North Korea. It is important to note that President Trump also recognized that meetings with Kim Jong Un without any conditions are not politically helpful for him either after the 2019 Hanoi Summit, and continued to emphasize working-level negotiations.

Second, it is contradictory to assume that Biden's policy toward North Korea will be tough due to Biden's negative perception of Kim Jong Un during the presidential debate. In 2017, President Trump called Kim Jong Un a "sick puppy," provoking North Korea. Also, President Trump said that he would completely destroy North Korea during his U.N. address in 2017. However, these words did not stop President Trump and Chairman Kim from meeting in early 2018. Similarly, if North Korea expresses its sincere willingness to negotiate denuclearization and shows a certain extent of improvement, then the Biden administration will recognize the need for a summit.

Third, the U.S. had not completed its line-up for North Korean affairs at the time of the summit between the U.S. and North Korea in 2018. Joseph Yun, who was serving as the U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Policy at the time, had resigned, and then the South Korean government passed along North Korea's willingness to negotiate with the U.S. Hence, the U.S. sent Randy Shriver, the assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific security affairs, Sung Kim, the U.S. ambassador to the Philippines, and Allison Hooker, senior director for Asian affairs, to negotiate with North Korea before the Singapore Summit. It was not until the fall of 2018 that Steve Biegun was appointed as the U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Policy. It should be noted that the negotiation with North Korea began even before the U.S. had a set group for negotiations with North Korea.

In the end, the Biden administration's North Korea policy depends on what North Korea does. If North Korea shows its willingness to negotiate, then the U.S. will send a team that will lead the negotiation even if Biden uses words against Kim Jong Un or the U.S. does not have a North Korea line. The pool of talent for this is bigger for the Biden administration than for the Trump administration.

There were concerns before the 2019 Hanoi Summit that President Trump might make an agreement that cannot fully denuclearize North Korea. However, President Trump set a standard himself that such an agreement is impossible. Therefore, it can be said that the Biden administration's approach will not much differ from what the U.S. administration, especially President Trump, showed after the 2019 Hanoi Summit. In the end, it is important whether North Korea is willing to negotiate denuclearization. And whether the North will communicate directly with the South, as it did in early 2018, will determine whether South Korea can influence the U.S. policy toward North Korea. ❀

※ *Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.*

※ *This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.*