**Biden Administration's Strategy toward Asia After the Withdrawal from Afghanistan**

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The manifest failures of the execution of the Biden administration’s withdrawal from Afghanistan have served to distract from the strategic intent behind the decision. In particular, apparent U.S. failure of political will in Afghanistan, intelligence failures regarding the capabilities of the Afghan government and the strength of the Taliban, and betrayal of former Afghan partners on the ground now at risk of Taliban reprisals have generated doubts among allies about U.S. credibility. While the manner of the Biden administration’s departure from Afghanistan has raised criticisms regarding the competency of the administration in managing the withdrawal, President Biden’s decision itself demonstrated resolution, a degree of realism and strategic clarity, and a clear shift in operational focus from counter-terrorism to major power rivalry as the main strategic challenge animating U.S. foreign policy. As a result, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan presents a variety of contradictory messages and signals for South Korean allies and for the U.S.-South Korea alliance. This paper will present a balance sheet of costs and benefits of the Biden administration’s withdrawal from Afghanistan with special reference to implications for the Biden administration’s policies toward Northeast Asia and specifically for the U.S.-South Korea alliance.

*Near-Term Costs of the Bungled U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan*

The immediate effects of the Biden administration’s execution of its withdrawal from Afghanistan have generated doubts about the Biden administration’s competence, if not its credibility, even while there are reasons for some allies to be encouraged about the strategic intent behind Biden’s Afghanistan withdrawal. Most of the doubts raised revolve around the operational execution of the withdrawal and concerns that the Biden administration’s decision to leave Afghanistan might provide further evidence of U.S. retrenchment and isolationism.

The Biden administration’s reliance on the argument that the critical decisions were already made by the Trump administration and that the Biden administration inherited a bad agreement with the Taliban were challenged by Republicans who noted that President Biden opted to reverse Trump administration policies on a wide range of foreign policy issues including reentry into the Paris climate change agreement and revitalization of U.S. alliances in Europe and Northeast Asia.[[1]](#endnote-1)

President Biden’s arguments that the United States should abandon its “forever war” in Afghanistan, that the counter-terrorism battle had been won long ago and that the United States could not want a liberal democratic Afghanistan more than the Afghan people themselves were met with a mixed response: on the one hand, U.S. funds spent to secure Afghanistan clearly were being wasted and misdirected as evidenced by the rapid collapse of the Afghan military in the face of the U.S. withdrawal; on the other hand, arguments that the counter-terrorism mission was successful were challenged even in the waning days of the U.S. withdrawal by an ISIS-K attack on the Kabul international airport. In addition, the Biden administration has left itself vulnerable to political attack in the event of renewed attacks from Afghanistan-based terrorists on the U.S. mainland.

1. Heightened Concerns About U.S. Global Retrenchment

The main concern for U.S. allies is whether U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan signals a broader retrenchment and flagging of U.S. political will to provide global leadership. Among U.S. allies such as South Korea that depend on U.S. commitments in support of their own national security, the critical question is whether the United States has been so fatigued by its overseas engagements that its commitment to the defense of the Korean peninsula may have waned. Despite the Biden administration’s desires to revitalize its alliances, sober Korean analysts must evaluate the constancy of the Biden administration and possible conditions surrounding the U.S. willingness to commit itself to South Korea’s defense even in the context of the alliance commitment. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, South Korean analysts have been closely scrutinizing the U.S. security commitment to South Korea by watching the language of Congressional authorizations, the U.S. posture on ongoing military issues within the alliance, and the Biden administration’s evolving debates over nuclear policies likely to be contained in the Nuclear Posture Review.

The first defense authorization legislation passed under the Biden administration removes a numerical floor on the number of troops stationed in South Korea, generating anticipation regarding possible shifts in the number of U.S. troops in South Korea as the Biden administration conducts its Global Posture Review.[[2]](#endnote-2) Prior authorization legislation under the Trump administration had required that the U.S. maintain a minimum of 28,500 troops in South Korea, but that numerical floor had been established due to concerns that the Trump administration might precipitously withdraw U.S. forces either to generate leverage on South Korea to meet his exorbitant burden sharing demands or as part of an agreement with Kim Jong Un.[[3]](#endnote-3) The removal of the numerical floor could be seen as a precursor to a broader U.S. retrenchment on the Korean peninsula, even though it probably reflects greater Congressional trust in Biden to handle Korea-related issues in contrast to doubts about Trump’s judgement.

In the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, a South Korean ruling party politician used the moment to advocate for a speedier completion of the operational control transition arrangements that would place a Korean commander atop the Combined Forces Command structure.[[4]](#endnote-4) This development might also be seen as evidence of a decline in confidence about the U.S. commitment to South Korea’s defense, though the idea of any direct linkage between circumstances facing the United States forces in Afghanistan and the circumstances facing U.S. forces in South Korea was quickly challenged and dismissed in South Korea’s public debate.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Finally, South Korean security analysts in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan have more closely scrutinized Biden administration extended deterrence policies, including internal Biden administration debates over “no first use” and “sole purpose” arguments for restricting the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. deterrence policies. In light of North Korea’s renewed commitment to nuclear and military development at the Eighth Party Congress, its refusal to date to engage in denuclearization negotiations with the United States, and a Defense Department report highlighting Chinese plans to expand its nuclear arsenal from less than 200 to around 1000 nuclear weapons by 2030,[[6]](#endnote-6) South Korean analysts are watching the Nuclear Posture Review closely for any weakening of U.S. commitments to extended deterrence while also exploring with the United States ways to enhance South Korea’s role as a stakeholder and partner alongside the United States in nuclear deterrence decision making.

1. Impact of Bungled U.S. Intelligence Assessments in Afghanistan

The manner of execution of the U.S. withdrawal also raised questions about U.S. intelligence judgements regarding the situation in Afghanistan. The seeming failure of the United States to anticipate the collapse of the Afghan government and the rapidity of the Taliban takeover led to many criticisms of the execution of U.S. strategy and policy in several areas. For instance, the U.S. decision to undertake a unilateral withdrawal from Bagram Air Force Base prior to evacuating Afghans who had worked with the U.S. military was a costly decision that came under fire for failing to take into account the likelihood of a rapid collapse of Afghan military and governance structures.[[7]](#endnote-7) This misjudgment was costly because it required the mobilization of troops and logistics necessary to enable the departure of over 100,000 Afghans in the weeks prior to the U.S. military withdrawal from the country and because it put at risk tens of thousands of Afghan families of individuals who served alongside the U.S. military but are now left in Afghanistan at risk of Taliban reprisals. The Biden administration’s failure to anticipate and make arrangements for former Afghan employees of the U.S. military who had critical roles supporting the U.S. presence in Afghanistan has been particularly troubling for allies. In addition, NATO allies expressed concerns about continued American unilateralism and inadequate consultations with NATO allies in advance of the U.S. decision to withdraw.[[8]](#endnote-8)

A significant impact of the unfolding of events in Afghanistan on the Korean peninsula is that it may have inadvertently sent a wrong signal to North Korea regarding U.S. resolve to stay on the Korean peninsula. The precipitous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan was a scenario that North Korean political and military leaders probably dream of for South Korea.[[9]](#endnote-9) A lesson that North Korea might take from the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is that U.S. resolve may falter and that a stunning reversal of circumstances is possible. There are risks that North Korea may redouble its efforts to test U.S. resolve or exploit potential South Korean security vulnerabilities.

*Long-Term Impact Of U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan*

On the other hand, Biden showed determination to make a decision that he thought was right for U.S. interests and that had eluded past presidents. Biden’s resolution to act according to his beliefs should be a source of reassurance for South Korea, which has received a lot of reassurances from the Biden administration in the context of Biden administration efforts to restore U.S. alliances. During his campaign, Biden sent an extraordinary signal of reassurance to South Korea in the form of a Yonhap editorial contribution reaffirming U.S. commitments to South Korea and pledging better treatment than Trump had offered.[[10]](#endnote-10) Biden followed up his pledge with an early removal of the burden sharing issue as a source of contention between the two allies with a rapid conclusion of the negotiations—in the process securing a healthy increase in South Korean financial support for the alliance that Trump had rejected.[[11]](#endnote-11)

1. Biden’s Determination

Biden’s reversion to a conventional foreign policy approach that featured strengthening of alliances as a centerpiece of its foreign policy surely was meant to provide reassurance to South Korea, but it has also come with a dramatic increase in both respect of and expectations for South Korea as a close alliance partner of the United States. By prioritizing partnership with South Korea and reaffirming the scope of the U.S.-South Korea alliance as a comprehensive partnership capable of providing public goods in a wide range of non-traditional security issues, Biden not only elevated the importance of South Korea’s global role and contributions but also underscored his expectations of South Korea as a country capable of and willing to work side by side with the United States as a close alliance partner. By reintroducing a conventional foreign policy framework designed to restore perceptions of U.S. consistency, backed by Biden’s longstanding track record of support for the U.S.-South Korea alliance, evidence of Biden’s resolution to act according to his view of American interests can be regarded as a reassuring signal for South Koreans who bound to welcome the U.S. aspiration to restore its traditional leadership in international affairs.

1. Prioritization of Strategic Competition With China

Perhaps the most important long-term aspect of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is that it showed that the Biden administration is prioritizing its foreign policy approach toward China and the Indo-Pacific, and that the process of prioritization includes eliminating involvements that serve as distractions to the overarching strategic objective of engaging in major power competition with China. By withdrawing from Afghanistan, Biden showed that he could make a decision to focus on his strategic priority rather than continuing to juggle everything all at once.

The Biden administration has framed the technological competition with China as a major strategic priority in its early months in office and is in the process of unfolding a wide range of strategic documents all designed to discipline the administration and mobilize it around the strategic competition with China, which Secretary Blinken characterized as “the only country with the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge the stable and open international system.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Blinken’s early characterization of the United States approach to China will be “competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be.”[[13]](#endnote-13) The Biden administration’s prioritization of competition with China as its primary strategic priority marks a departure from decades of U.S. effort to juggle many different priorities at the same time, but it also provides strategic clarity and shows the discipline to make strategic choices about its global involvements and priorities.

The Biden administration’s decision to focus on China comes after a decade of effort on the part of strategists concerned with China’s rise to convince the United States to pivot toward the Indo-Pacific as the primary focal point of strategic competition. But prior efforts to redirect U.S. attention during the Obama administration were hampered by U.S. commitments in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Middle East. This time, the Biden administration is showing a willingness to shed those commitments that have sucked up time and attention and drawn the focus of U.S. decision-makers away from the Sino-U.S. competition in the Indo-Pacific.

In this context, the Biden administration’s decision to depart from Afghanistan should send a signal to South Korea that the Biden administration is taking China seriously. South Korea has worried that rising Sino-U.S. rivalry reduces space for South Korea’s preferred strategy of avoiding choices between China and the United States on the basis of South Korea’s longstanding framing of its strategic position as dependent on China for economic opportunity while depending on the alliance with the United States for security. As the Sino-U.S. competition unfolds, on the one hand, South Korea’s ability to avoid choosing between China and the United States will be constrained; on the other hand, the United States is now signaling a seriousness of purpose and is pursuing a strategy that requires a reframing of many economic decisions, especially in the technology sphere, as choices that are inextricable from security considerations. As a result, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan sends a signal of strategic resolve that ultimately should be reassuring to those in South Korea concerned about Chinese overreach and who desire to see the United States fight to restore its traditional global and regional roles.

1. Shift from Counter-terrorism to Great Power Rivalry

Finally, the Biden administration has demonstrated through actions that the focal point for U.S. policy is no longer counter-terrorism but rather is a focus on great power rivalry. This shift in priority deemphasizes efforts to eliminate terrorist training grounds in favor of a strategic competition with China. As a result, U.S. involvements with East Asia have risen to the top of the presidential priority list, for the first time eclipsing U.S. concerns in Europe and the Middle East. This focus represents continuity with the themes of the Trump administration’s 2017 National Security Strategy.[[14]](#endnote-14) Now, the focus on major power competition has become a priority across the U.S. government, led by the White House and supported by major Congressional legislative contributions such as the CHIPS act and other reforms designed to elevate the U.S. ability to compete effectively with China.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The major impact of the U.S. shift from counter-terrorism to great power for rivalry for South Korea is that it shifts both the strategic priorities and the nature and forms of cooperation that are most desirable in the context of the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Instead of requesting South Korean military support for international stabilization operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Biden administration is seeking greater partnership with South Korea on non-traditional security issues around the world and on investment cooperation and development assistance in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, U.S. requests for assistance in the context of major power rivalry fall closer to the center of South Korean strategic concerns than did U.S. requests for international assistance to address out-of-area counter-terrorism threats through the contribution of military stabilization forces. Moreoever, South Korea has significant capability to join with the United States to contribute to the provision of international public goods and to work with the United States on such areas as pandemic response (international public health), supply chain resiliency, and climate change. In this respect, the shift from counter-terrorism to great power rivalry has expanded opportunities for U.S.-South Korea cooperation, even as South Korea remains mindful of its desire to navigate rising Sino-U.S. rivalry while trying to avoid entrapment between the two sides.

Conclusion

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