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## [Column] Hopes and fears about Biden's North Korean policy

Posted on : Feb.22,2021 16:22 KST Modified on : Feb.22,2021 16:22 KST



US President Joe Biden speaks at a town hall meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on CNN, on Feb. 16. (AFP/Yonhap News)



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While it doesn't appear that the Joe Biden administration has completed its review of North Korea policy yet, the outlines of that policy seem to be slowly taking shape. Ned Price, a spokesperson for the US State Department, said on Feb. 12 that the North Korean nuclear issue is an "urgent priority for the United States and one that we are committed to addressing together with our allies." Those remarks are encouraging, since they alleviate lingering concerns that the North Korean nuclear issue might be put on the back burner by the Biden administration.

On the other hand, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken raised concerns about North Korea's nuclear capability, stressing the possibility of more sanctions on the North and trilateral cooperation with South Korea and Japan to find a solution to the North Korean nuclear issue. That stance is more worrying, since it could represent a continuation of past policies such as strategic patience, relying on sanctions on and deterrence against Pyongyang.

More creative ideas are needed to solve the North Korean nuclear issue, which has become a tangled web for the past three decades. Let's start with the debate about Pyongyang's intentions.

So-called Korean Peninsula experts in Washington jump to the conclusion that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un isn't willing to denuclearize, and then call for more pressure on the North. But assuming that Pyongyang wouldn't give up nuclear weapons under any circumstances leaves no room for diplomacy.

The diplomatic approach would be to focus on Kim's comment — made on multiple occasions — that he would give up nuclear weapons under the right conditions, and to guide the situation in that direction. Demanding that Pyongyang dismantle its nuclear program first in hopes of being rewarded later is a bad move that squashes that potential, since Pyongyang would never accept such a demand.

Another frequently heard phrase is that the US doesn't want to "buy the same horse twice." Such an attitude may come naturally to the Biden administration, which regards Trump's summit diplomacy with North Korea as little more than a reality show.

But if Trump and Kim's summits were a substance-free show, the ultimate reason for that is their failure to reach a concrete and meaningful agreement. North Korea and the US didn't carry out the promises they made in Singapore to normalize relations, build a lasting peace regime and work toward complete denuclearization. In their summit in Hanoi, Trump rejected Kim's offer to close the Yongbyon nuclear complex, and in the end they couldn't reach a deal.

That's why the Biden administration needs to learn a lesson from the Trump administration's diplomacy and pursue a "real deal." Reaching a substantial agreement with North Korea would entail changing the negotiating paradigm. There's unlikely to be any progress if they adopt a cognitive frame of "crime and punishment."

When it comes down to it, that frame is at least partly to blame for the failure of the Trump administration's North Korean policy. In order to overcome what was effectively a double impasse in the talks and move to the next stage, the US needed to show Pyongyang that "good behavior" could bring about some degree of progress if it returned to the negotiating table. But even as North Korea and the US continued to make contact and negotiate in 2018 and 2019, the US slapped more than 200 new sanctions on the North.

That's why sanctions should be used as leverage to achieve the goal of North Korea's complete denuclearization — through an approach that's flexible and strategic, rather than mechanical and bureaucratic.

On a more fundamental level, there's the question of the relative priority of the nuclear issue and human rights. Unlike the previous administration, the Biden administration regards human rights as a universal value.

The question is whether it's effective to simultaneously demand denuclearization and apply pressure on human rights issues. US attention to the human rights issue only tightens North Korea's grip on its nuclear program, since Pyongyang considers such attention as being part of the US's "policy of hostility." That ultimately makes it impossible to bring about any improvement in the human rights situation.

But achieving major progress on the nuclear issue and lifting sanctions would make it possible to substantially improve the quality of life of people in North Korea.

Washington's appeals on human rights issues would also be more persuasive to Pyongyang if the two sides could build confidence while making progress toward denuclearization.

Furthermore, if North Korea's denuclearization and economic recovery lead to some degree of reforms and opening and if civil society takes shape in the North, albeit within constraints, it would eventually propel change in the human rights situation.

In retrospect, failures of intelligence and errors in judgment were present at every disappointing moment in the 30 years of North Korea's nuclear program. Chief among them were the willful assumptions that just a little more pressure would cause the Pyongyang regime to collapse, and that the threat to North Korea comes not from without but from within.

The same can be said for North Korea's conviction that it must cling to its nuclear arsenal for the sake of the regime's security. In fact, Pyongyang ought to regard the nuclear talks themselves as an essential bargaining chip, if only to bring about the economic improvement that's essential to stabilizing the regime in the long term.

To borrow a phrase from Harvard University Professor Joseph Nye, it's time we gained some "contextual intelligence" about North Korea. It hardly needs to be said that the South Korean government is the Biden administration's most critical partner for gaining that intelligence.

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