

## Some post-election thoughts



### **Kathleen Stephens**

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It was only a couple of Saturdays ago that I was walking, masked of course, on a gorgeous autumn day along a Washington street lined with gingko trees aflame in gold, four days after the Nov. 3 general election, when I heard the news that Joe Biden had been declared the winner. Actually what I heard was the sound of cars honking and the shouts of cyclists and pedestrians reverberating through the streets, and then the ping of incoming text messages. I can't say I felt joy. Rather I was overwhelmed with relief. I could breathe again.

The American democratic experiment had survived. The voter turn-out was historically high. This huge country's decentralized, volunteer-dependent election infrastructure managed admirably despite pandemic and politicization. The results underscore the depth of polarization in America, but they are clear. Former Vice President Joe Biden won decisively both the popular vote and the electoral college. He will be sworn in as President on Jan. 20, 2021.

Nonetheless, America remains edgy, turned in on itself, as coronavirus cases surge, economic insecurity grows, and Donald Trump sulks, refusing to concede, determined to break norms and disrupt until the end. Many dangers lurk between now and Inauguration Day, both domestically and abroad.

But the world is eager to move on, with more foreign leaders than Republican senators sending timely congratulations to President-elect Biden. I am glad that Korean President Moon Jae-in was among the early group of leaders of democracies to reach out to the president-elect. Their first telephone conversation went well. Biden underscored the regard and significance he attaches to the alliance and to the Korean-American community with his column in the Korean press just before the election; he reiterated it with his visit as president-elect to the Korean War Memorial in his home state of Delaware on Nov. 11.

But what can Korea expect from Biden, given the many crises and challenges he faces at home and abroad? And what might Biden expect from Korea?

Looming large is the sense of America's troubles at home and weakened place in the world, and of the dangers of China's current aggressive posture. U.S.-China competition will continue to sharpen, regardless of who resides in the White House.

Biden's long career in foreign policy, the advisors around him, and his statements as candidate give an indication of his approach to these challenges. He

prioritizes the rejuvenation of America's alliances and other partnerships, seeking to repair and reassure after the Trump years. He will embrace multilateralism, with America seeking to retake or hopefully share the lead. Values — democracy promotion and human rights — will be back on the agenda. And he will make clear he understands that America's domestic renewal must underpin the renewal of American credibility in the world.

This Biden doctrine, if you will, would seem a natural fit for South Korea, and for U.S.-Korea relations. The Biden administration — and the much-maligned career public servants in and out of uniform — will be eager to put the disgraceful Trump approach to burden-sharing (“extortion” in Biden's words) and settle the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) negotiation. Seoul and Washington have long experience working together across the range of multilateral efforts, from the G-20 to the United Nations, and on issues from climate change to development to shaping high-standard international trade norms, including labor and environmental protections. Seoul brings technical capability and political will to addressing the newer menu of issues crying out for international cooperation, notably in areas like digital infrastructure and security, and establishing protocols and protections for emerging technologies.

But it's a complex strategic environment for both Seoul and Washington. Shaping and implementing actual policy toward shared goals, even between allies, requires careful listening, and accommodation to domestic and geopolitical realities by both sides, an approach sometimes shortchanged in an earlier, unipolar world. The United States would do better pursuing an “a la carte” approach to regional cooperation rather than seeking more formal arrangements. A Biden administration will attach importance to Seoul-Tokyo relations and be inclined to push to improve them; success is not a foregone conclusion and such an effort could backfire. Biden, unlike Trump, genuinely attaches great importance to alliances and to shared values. But this means he could ask, and expect, more of South Korea, not less. Given the likely trajectory of U.S.-China competition, this will exacerbate longstanding Korean anxieties that it will be squeezed into confronting choices it hopes to avoid having to make.

Seoul will have its own hopes and expectations for a Biden administration. North Korea looms large. Both Seoul and Washington have preconceptions about each other's policy preferences that are at best incomplete and untested. Early consultations are essential, and made more difficult by Trump's refusal to allow a normal transition process to go forward.

In Seoul the worry of a Biden reversion to Obama-era “strategic patience” is overblown; the concern that Biden will not have “time” for North Korea is also a distraction. Seoul may have to exercise a little patience — and urge Pyongyang to do the same — while the Biden administration conducts the inevitable and necessary policy review. But at the same time Seoul and Washington should be in deep consultations, building a relationship of deep trust between Presidents Moon and Biden that will set the framework for the hard work we have to do together not only on the Korean peninsula but on our shared regional and global challenges.

For myself and hundreds of Americans like me who were Peace Corps volunteers in Korea in the 1960s and 1970s, we had a special reason to give thanks in recent weeks. Many of us received unexpected packages in the mail from Korea, with the intriguing label in English, “Covid-19 Survival Package.” What could that be? In fact, it was a package containing 100 Korean-made masks, lovely silver chopsticks, ginseng candy, a fan and more, all beautifully wrapped in Korean traditional paper called hanji. Also included was a USB stick with a video remembrance and appreciation of our days in Korea. My social media feed came alive with reactions from former volunteers (we are all now in our 60s and 70s) of overwhelming emotion and gratitude; for many, receiving the package brought tears of deep emotion. One wrote: “Thank you, Korea, for remembering us. I certainly remember you!”

So thank you, Korea, for remembering the Peace Corps so thoughtfully, and thank you, Korea, for your readiness to work with the United States to ensure that, as President-elect Biden has put it, we “Build Back Better.” With our friends and allies, we must and we will.



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