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[Column] The trap of the Biden administration and progressive idealism

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The incoming administration offers no guarantees that the US will promote international peace



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Joe Biden received 306 votes in the electoral college on Dec. 14, officially concluding the exhausting race for US president. That has fueled hopes that the US will say goodbye to the nightmare of the Trump era and welcome a new era. After all, Biden has made it abundantly clear that he means to liquidate Trump's transactional and unilateral approach and his "America first" vision to pursue a multilateral foreign policy, international cooperation, and alliance relationships grounded in mutual respect and liberal internationalism. That's undeniably music to South Koreans' ears.

But there are still things to be concerned about. In a column in the Dec. 15 edition of the Washington Post, Robert Wright, an author best known for "The Evolution of God," raised four such concerns while observing that the Biden administration is likely to repeat the mistakes of the Obama administration. Wright's analysis is incisive and on target.

Wright's first concern is the lack of strategic humility and the possibility that political and military interventionism will become more routine. More specifically, he's worried that we might see a repeat of the Obama administration's failed interventions in Libya and in Syria. The US rushed into Libya in 2011 and Syria in 2013, trusting its overwhelming military power without carefully analyzing the situation on the ground. That ultimately led to massive civilian casualties and unleashed torrents of refugees.

The second concern is a shortage of cognitive empathy. Unless the US respects the perspectives of other countries and leaders and tries to see the world through their eyes, it's likely to take unilateral diplomatic and military measures. In 2013, the Obama administration played a major role in helping a pro-Western faction in Ukraine depose the democratically elected president Viktor Yanukovich, on the pretext of promoting democracy. The consequences were a protracted civil war in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.

Wright observes that the Obama administration's foreign policy and national security teams missed the fact that Ukraine has traditionally been part of Russia's sphere of influence, which prevented them from predicting just how sharply Russian President Vladimir Putin would react. Wright points out that similar mistakes could be made by the Biden administration.

Wright's third concern is that the Biden administration's foreign policy and national security policy could be obstructed by a Manichaean vision of good and evil. It's not only American neoconservatives who hold the dualistic view that the US is a "shining city on a hill" and the pinnacle of good things and that all its opponents are evil, Wright says, arguing that such tendencies are also apparent in Biden's team.

Biden aides still veer toward moral unilateralism

Tony Blinken, Biden's nominee for US Secretary of State, has argued that the world is composed of techno-democracies and techno-autocracies and that a coalition of democratic states is necessary to resist the techno-autocracies. Wright attacks this as a dangerous idea. While the idea's assumptions differ from those of the neocons, its consequences are much the same: denouncing countries like China and North Korea as evil and advocating political and military pressure and economic sanctions against them based on the US' moral unilateralism.

Finally, Wright says that although the Biden administration espouses a liberal internationalism that emphasizes international law and international norms, it's likely to make the mistake of undervaluing the sovereignty of individual countries and arbitrarily interpreting international law. He's especially concerned about the possible reappearance of the politics of American exceptionalism and the accompanying efforts for regime change in specific countries without the consent of the UN.

Wright, who identifies himself as a progressive realist, warns that Biden's foreign policy and national security advisors only pay lip service to liberal internationalism and actually hew closer to interventionism and progressive idealism. That means that values, rather than the national interest, could be used to justify military interventions, wars, and the loss of innocent lives.

While I'm not convinced by all of Wright's analysis, one noteworthy point is that there's no guarantee that the beginning of the Biden era will bring back the peaceful world order we've been longing for. That has major implications for South Korea.

Even in South Korea, there are plenty of people who are drunk on strategic arrogance, willing to use force against North Korea and overconfident in America's military might; people who bash those who try to understand North Korea's perspective as communist sympathizers; people who demonize North Korea and regard it as their historical mission to overthrow the Pyongyang regime.

Despite sharing the characteristics of American neocons or progressive idealists, such people, in apparent confusion, describe themselves as realists.

The ability to recognize the mistakes of the past is essential for avoiding mistakes in the future. I hope that the Biden administration, which will take over in January 2021, will employ a wise foreign policy based on reason, international law, and international norms, a foreign policy that is grounded in strategic humility and cognitive empathy.

I also hope that South Korea's "fake realists" who despise North Korea and are infatuated with the US through their myopic prioritization of values over the national interest will ponder what kind of realism would genuinely conform to the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

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