

The US-ROK Summit and Major Issues Facing the US-ROK Alliance

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Introduction

On May 21, 2020, President Moon Jae-in and President Joseph Biden held their first summit in Washington, D.C., which led to the release of a joint statement of what they had discussed. This brief aims to analyze the US-ROK joint statement from the perspective of the US-ROK alliance. Starting when he was a candidate for president, Biden has emphasized the importance of the United States' alliances, and has long praised the value of alliances amid the strategic competition between the United States and China. This is why there has been so much focus on how South Korea's stance on the Quad, an informal multilateral dialogue involving the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, will be coordinated with views held by Washington. Another important area of interest has been the Biden administration's stance on how to resolve one of the major issues facing the US-ROK alliance, the North Korean nuclear issue.¹

Diving In

As mentioned, one of the major issues facing the leaders of the United States and South Korea during their summit meetings has been the Quad. It is also true that there has been domestic and international pressure on South Korea to express an interest in joining the Quad so as to show a clear sign of support for countering a rising China.

Upon close inspection of the joint statement, it is easy to discover that in multiple places the two countries have, despite palpable tension, found a compromise between the US intent to have South Korea join in on "balancing" China and the South Korean desire to attenuate this US intent. There is a particular word worth noting here that was used during US-ROK summit: "inclusive," which is the antonym of the word "exclusive." This word is used in the following two circumstances: "...acknowledge the importance of open, transparent, and inclusive regional multilateralism including the Quad" and "...maintaining an inclusive, free, and open Indo-Pacific." (both emphases by the author)² In the first instance, the word is used to refer to the nature of the Quad, while in the second case it is used to refer to the nature of the Indo-Pacific order. The word "inclusive" used here means that the Quad will not exclude China, and that China will not be excluded from the Indo-Pacific order. It appears that the South Korean side strongly argued for

¹ Of course, while confirming the conditional transition of wartime operational control or welcoming the conclusion of a special agreement for splitting military-related expenditures are important issues facing the US-ROK alliance, they are not new, nor do they present much in the way of surprises. This is why I have chosen not to discuss them in this brief.

² White House, "U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement," May 21, 2021.

this word to be included in the final joint statement. This becomes clear when comparing it with the joint statement released after President Biden and Japanese prime minister Yoshihide Suga's summit on April 16, 2021.³ In the case of the US-Japan joint statement, the phrase "a free and open Indo-Pacific" was used, but the word "inclusive" was never mentioned in regards to the Quad or the Indo-Pacific order.⁴

Given this, why was the word "inclusive" used in the US-ROK joint statement? As mentioned earlier, the use of the word reflects the concerns on the South Korean side over antagonizing or excluding China from the Indo-Pacific order. The inclusion of the word also suggests that the South Korean side told the Americans that it will be difficult for them to participate in the Quad, which is aimed at checking China. Then, does this mean that the United States, which accepted the use of "inclusive" in the final document, has weakened its attitude toward checking or excluding China? That may not be the case. In the US-Japan joint statement, President Biden allowed the use of language directed at China explicitly, and almost an entire paragraph of that statement is devoted to criticism of China.⁵ As such, it is likely that the US side included the word "inclusive" on principle following a demand by the South Korean side. In short, the use of the word likely does not mean a change in US policy toward China.

Given the US-China relationship, another area worthy of note in the US-ROK joint statement is its reference to the "Taiwan" or "Taiwan Strait" issue.⁶ Apparently, the mention of this issue is brief and may seem unproblematic given that the two countries simply emphasize the "importance of preserving peace and stability" there; however, the Taiwan Strait issue is a very sensitive one from the Chinese perspective, so much so that its reference could be viewed as an "interference" in China's "internal affairs." Moreover, the issue was not one that would have been worth specific discussion during the US-ROK summit. What is interesting, however, is that the Taiwan Strait issue was also mentioned in the joint statement released after the US-Japan summit. Before the US-Japan summit, the United States mentioned the Taiwan issue during the 2+2 ministerial meeting held in March 2021, and the US side reportedly pushed the Japanese side to include the issue in the joint statement released after the summit.⁷

The US-Japanese joint statement goes beyond what is said in the US-ROK joint statement by including the phrase "encourage the peaceful resolution of disputes" and it is likely that this statement was removed from the US-ROK joint statement through negotiations between the two countries.⁸

³ White House, "U.S.- Japan Joint Leaders' Statement: U.S. – JAPAN GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR A NEW ERA," April 16, 2021.

⁴ The phrase "a free and open Indo-Pacific" was popularized by former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe and is a slogan of the Quad.

⁵ On the other hand, in the latest US-ROK joint statement, no explicit mention of China was made. The statement only refers to the South China Sea.

⁶ "President Biden and President Moon emphasize the importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait."

⁷ The mention of Taiwan in the US-Japan Leaders' Joint Statement was the first in almost forty years since President Nixon's meeting with Prime Minister Eisaku Sato. Taiwan News, "US Presses Japan to Issue Joint Statement in Support of Taiwan," *Taiwan News*, April 15, 2021.

⁸ The Taiwan Strait-related wording in the US-Japanese joint statement is: "We underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues."

Why then did the United States highlight the Taiwan issue during summits with its two important military alliance partners in East Asia, Japan and South Korea? Given that a declaration of independence by Taiwan would mean war with China, and given the lack of a US reconfirmation of explicit support for the “one China principle,” why the United States chose to use these expressions in both joint statements defies an easy answer and requires in-depth analysis. There needs to be a close analysis of whether the United States is trying to curb China by intervening in the Taiwan issue, or whether Washington simply aims to test the resolve of Beijing. No matter what the US intentions are, the United States may seek to win support from its important alliance partners in Asia, Japan and South Korea. Of course, when considering the details of the alliance agreements the United States has with Japan and South Korea, there is only a small possibility that either country will get dragged into an armed conflict over Taiwan. However, it is important not to overlook the fact that President Biden has made clear that he will actively use US alliances and that the two joint statements emphasize expanded roles of the alliances and responses to regional threats.⁹

While the Sino-American relationship and the Quad are important issues facing the US-ROK alliance, the two countries also face the important security issue of North Korea’s nuclear program. Based on the US-ROK joint statement, it is evident that the Moon administration spared no effort to continue the momentum for US-DPRK dialogue aimed at resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. The joint statement includes wording reconfirming the Panmunjom Declaration of 2018 and the joint statement made after the US-DPRK summit in Singapore. Aside from the Panmunjom Declaration, the insertion of the Singapore summit-reminiscent of the Trump administration-in the joint statement represents the Moon administration’s insistence on the revival of US-DPRK dialogue. Moreover, the inclusion of wording showing support for inter-Korean dialogue, engagement and cooperation by President Biden and the expression of support for divided family reunions and humanitarian aid to North Korea can also be considered important achievements on the road to resolving the North Korean nuclear issue, at least from South Korea’s perspective.

That being said, there are several signs evident in the joint statement that Washington pushed back on the Moon administration’s engagement policies toward North Korea. First, the ROK government agreed that the UN Security Council’s resolutions be faithfully implemented, which means that it will be difficult to expect a loosening of economic sanctions on North Korea for the time being. Moreover, there are other areas of the joint statement that could serve as significant barriers to South Korea’s engagement policies, including a reference to North Korea’s human rights conditions, the need for “in-lockstep” coordination with the United States regarding North Korea policy, and the need for policy coordination between the United States, South Korea, and Japan. All this suggests that it will not be easy for the Moon administration to move its engagement policy forward.

A final brief point on the US-ROK alliance to be made here is in regards to why an explicit

⁹ This sentence is in the final paragraph of the US-ROK joint statement: “We recognize that, with our cooperation, *the U.S.-ROK alliance will play an increasingly global role, allowing us to rise to these defining challenges.*” (author’s emphasis)

mention of the “nuclear umbrella policy” was omitted from the paragraph related to the United States’ security commitments toward the Korean Peninsula. The joint statement says that “President Biden affirms the U.S. commitment to provide extended deterrence using its full range of capabilities.” Usually, “using its full range of capabilities” would be followed by “conventional and nuclear” along with a mention of defense against a nuclear-based attack. However, the joint statement from this latest summit refrains from using the word “nuclear.”

In the US-Japan Leaders’ Joint Statement earlier this year, the statement has the words “including nuclear,” and the joint statement that came after the President Moon and President Trump summit in 2017 included the words “both conventional and nuclear.”¹⁰

While the use of the phrase “full range of capabilities” could still imply both conventional and nuclear weapons, questions remain as to why the word “nuclear” was left out. The omission does not immediately mean a weakened US commitment to the Korean Peninsula. Supposedly, one possibility is that the word may have been omitted to avoid provoking North Korea. Future research will need to uncover the reasons behind this omission.

Conclusion

This essay briefly analyzed the recent US-ROK summit’s joint statement with a focus on two major points of contention in the US-ROK alliance, the Quad and North Korean nuclear issues. In the joint statement, South Korea showed itself unwilling to involve itself with the Quad and the US Indo-Pacific policy aimed at checking and excluding China. Based on wording in the joint statement, South Korea appears focused on encouraging regional multilateralism, which allows all parties, including China, to participate. While the United States does not seem to have accepted the South Korean stance, wording that supports this stance was included in the joint statement, signaling that the United States understands South Korea’s position.

Moreover, South Korea revealed via the joint statement that Seoul intends to revive through its engagement policies the momentum of US-DPRK dialogue focused on North Korea’s nuclear issue. South Korea’s garnering of support from President Biden on this can be viewed as a partial success; however, progress on South Korea’s engagement policies will not be easy going forward given various limiting factors. **/END/**

¹⁰ The original version of the joint statement can be found here: U.S. Embassy and Consulate in the Republic of Korea, “Joint Statement between the United States and the Republic of Korea,” June 30, 2017.