



2020 Democratic National Convention and North Korea

Yonho Kim (George Washington Institute for Korean Studies)

The First Virtual Democratic National Convention and the Defeat Trump Coalition

This year's Democratic National Convention in the United States marked a historic transition in many ways due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Democratic Party convened major party stakeholders and leading participants to a virtual platform guided mainly by public health concerns, while giving up the traditional plan designed for a crowded political festival. Joseph Biden delivered a speech to accept the Democratic nomination for president, which is the culmination of the convention, on a lonely stage without crowds roaring with enthusiasm, but surrounded by flags in an empty convention hall. The first virtual national party convention of its kind offered a unique experience for viewers with a mix of prerecorded speeches and well-produced visual elements. Many viewers had already become used to virtual political campaigns since the COVID-19 outbreak earlier this year. However, the virtual convention highlighted the fact that the pandemic has reshaped not only everyday life in America but also the whole domestic political process with potential long-term impacts.

Not surprisingly, the headline convention speakers, including Biden's running mate Senator Kamala Harris and former presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, consistently tried to draw attention to Biden's superb candidacy, but it was also obvious that the main theme dominating the four-day convention was "Defeat Trump." The Democratic Party demonstrated a broad coalition of constituents, including the left that initially rallied to Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren at the primary, seeking to end the tumult of the Trump era. The "Defeat Trump" coalition made the

case for Biden's candidacy by arguing that he has the best chance to end the chaos Donald Trump's presidency created.

Republicans were also invited to join the coalition. Along with some Republicans who voted for Trump in 2016, former Ohio governor John Kasich and former secretary of state Colin Powell lent another Republican voice supporting Biden's candidacy at the convention. On the same day of Biden's acceptance speech, more than 70 former Republican national security officials released a statement endorsing the former vice president. The group, including former intelligence chiefs, contested Trump's dangerous incompetence with "Biden's character, experience, and temperament to lead the nation." In the following week of the convention, more than 20 former Republican lawmakers endorsed Biden for president on the first day of the Republican National Convention. The increasing number of notable "Republicans for Biden" revealed growing frustrations with the direction of their party and offered a symbolic boost to Biden although Trump's overwhelming popularity among Republican voters remains intact.

Restoring America's Reputation and Biden's North Korea Policy

The 2020 Democratic Party Platform endorsed at the party's national convention made it clear that repairing the soul and character of the United States will be the party's guiding principle for the upcoming presidential campaign and beyond. In order to unite and heal the nation, the Democratic party called for a new national leadership to address "the worst public health crisis in a century, the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, the worst period of global upheaval in a generation, the urgent global crisis posed by climate change, the intolerable racial injustice that still stains the fabric of our nation." Likewise, on foreign policy, the platform aimed to renew American leadership and restore America's reputation and influence in the world. In this context, Trump was blamed for "sowing doubts about our commitments to diplomatic agreements, mutual defense, democratic values, and strategic purpose." In particular, the platform opposed to Trump's demand for a dramatic increase in South Korea's share of alliance costs amid a nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula.

Without articulating the Korean Peninsula in his acceptance speech, Biden reiterated the party platform's rebuke of Trump's bold top-down approach to North Korea. He said, "I will make it clear to our adversaries the days of cozying up to dictators are over." This statement echoed the party platform's argument that rather than defend democracy and human rights, Trump has fawned over autocrats and sent love letters to despots. Although Biden did not elaborate on his administration's North Korea policy at the party's convention, the party platform succinctly

described a Democratic alternative: “Together with our allies—and through diplomacy with North Korea — we will constrain and contain the threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear program and its regional belligerence. We will build a sustained, coordinated diplomatic campaign to advance the longer-term goal of denuclearization. And we will not forget the people of North Korea—Democrats will support humanitarian aid and pressure the regime to cease its gross human rights abuses.”

According to a *New York Times* survey of Democratic presidential candidates during the early primaries, Biden has already favored a mixture of multilateral diplomacy and sanctions in containing North Korea’s nuclear threats unless there is an imminent long-range missile attack from Pyongyang. He aimed to “set the right formula of sanctions enforcement and sanctions relief” and “make it harder for Kim [Jung-un] to continue on his belligerent path, while making credible efforts to offer an alternative vision for a nonnuclear future to Kim and the people of North Korea.” Biden was not responsive to the idea of gradually lifting sanctions in return for Pyongyang’s nuclear freeze. Rather, he revealed his intention to be assertive with Pyongyang by agreeing to insist on substantial disarmament before relieving any sanctions.

Strategic Patience 2.0?

After the failed Hanoi summit with North Korea in 2019, the Trump administration’s approach to North Korea relied on its own version of strategic patience although Trump himself derided the Obama administration for arriving at the same kind of stalemate with Pyongyang: one with no real negotiations and no intentional escalation. Some North Korea watchers are skeptical that a Biden administration would turn out differently. Both Biden and Kim would refuse to return to diplomacy unless the other side would abandon its own strategic patience. After all, North Korea blasted Biden calling him an “imbecile” and a “rabid dog” in response to his strong objection to Trump’s bromance with Kim who is, in his words, “a murderous dictator.”

Trump promised to make deals with North Korea “very quickly” if re-elected. Some experts in Washington speculate that Trump’s legacy project with Pyongyang would immediately start with his second term. However, if Biden wins the November presidential election, the U.S. policy toward North Korea is likely to be centered on working-level diplomacy and coordination with its allies and partners. Indeed, Biden’s top North Korea policy advisers are familiar with the ‘strategic patience’ camp that will not offer any diplomatic rewards for bad behaviors.

Biden has also been accusing Trump of ignoring North Korea’s human rights abuses while coddling the country’s dictator Kim Jung-un. It is noteworthy that a long-time pro-engager like

Biden drew attention to the human rights situation in North Korea which has become a serious bipartisan concern with Pyongyang in Washington. In addition to the human rights front, a Biden administration would have to engage with a North Korea determined to return to its *byungjin line* and pursue its new offensive for making a breakthrough head-on in face of the tight international sanctions. Furthermore, Pyongyang's self-isolation amid the COVID-19 pandemic would allow little chance of resuming engagement with the North at least in the near term.

Will the Defeat Trump Coalition Succeed?

Biden kicked off the general election campaign with a clear lead over Trump in most national polls. The "Defeat Trump" coalition is likely to continue expanding its base among the independent and moderate Republican voters. Biden has also been adept in not allowing any room for his opponents to link him to the left, especially on immigration, health care, and defunding the police, although Trump kept attacking him as a tool of the left.

Uncertainties surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, the Biden campaign admits, will define the election results. Voters have a hard time paying attention to Biden's vision for a new America when the COVID-19 pandemic (not to mention social injustice protests and police brutality) dictates their daily lives. The political needle amongst swing voters and moderate Republicans would ultimately be moved by the way the pandemic subsides leading up to the November election. It is still uncertain how the pandemic would impact voter turnout and the controversies over mail-in voting would disrupt the vote-counting process. In addition, the fall debates could be a turning point for the Biden campaign depending on the candidates' performances on the stage. Should the former vice president win in November, though, it will open the window for removing Trump's various footprints in Washington. ■

- **Yonho Kim** is Associate Research Professor of Practice and Associate Director of GW Institute for Korean Studies. He specializes in North Korea's mobile telecommunications and U.S. policy towards North Korea. Kim is the author of *North Korea's Mobile Telecommunications and Private Transportation Services in the Kim Jong-un Era* (2019) and *Cell Phones in North Korea: Has North Korea Entered the Telecommunications Revolution?* (2014). His research findings were covered by various media outlets, including Wall Street Journal, The Atlantic, Yonhap News, and Libération. Prior to joining GWIKS, he extensively interacted with the Washington policy circle on the Korean peninsula as Senior Researcher of the US-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Senior Reporter for Voice of America's Korean Service, and Assistant Director of the Atlantic Council's Program on Korea in Transition. He holds a B.A. and M.A. in International Relations from Seoul National University, and an M.A. in International Relations and International Economics from Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.

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Date of Issue: 1 September 2020

979-11-6617-015-7 95340

Typesetting: Jinkyung Baek

For inquiries:

Jinkyung Baek, Research Associate/Project Manager

North Korea and National Security Research Group

Asia Democracy Research Group

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 209)

j.baek@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 04548, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr