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US, S Korean leaders meet in face of N Korea nuclear threat

Лідери США та Південної Кореї зустрілися перед обличчям ядерної загрози Північної Кореї

Коли лідери США та Південної Кореї зустрінуться, ядерна зброя та ракетна програма Північної Кореї, яка вже є в центрі уваги, може отримати додаткову увагу. Однак менш зрозуміло, чи дасть зустріч між президентом США Джо Байденом і нещодавно обраним президентом Південної Кореї Юн Сок Йолем суттєво новий спосіб подолання ядерної загрози, яка тривожить союзників вже протягом десятиліть. У Сеулі стурбовані тим, що Вашингтон повертається до політики «стратегічного терпіння» адміністрації Обами, ігноруючи Північну Корею, поки вона не продемонструє серйозність щодо денуклеаризації. Співробітники розвідки США та Південної Кореї кажуть, що Північна Корея може привітати Д. Байдена в регіоні шляхом випробування балістичної ракети або першого з 2017 року підриву ядерного пристрою.

<https://apnews.com/article/biden-covid-health-seoul-japan-bbf05774a1b55c8a95794dc412f926f8>



This photo combination of two file photos shows U.S. President Joe Biden, right, in Washington, on May 15, 2022, and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol in Seoul, on May 10, 2022. When the U.S. and South Korean leaders meet Saturday, May 21, North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile program, already a major focus, may receive extra attention if intelligence predictions of an imminent major weapons demonstration by the North, which is struggling with a COVID-19 outbreak, are right. (AP Photo/File)

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — When the U.S. and South Korean leaders meet Saturday, North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile program, already a major focus, may receive extra attention if intelligence predictions of an imminent major weapons demonstration by the North, which is struggling with a COVID-19 outbreak, are right.

What's less clear, however, is whether the meeting between Joe Biden and newly inaugurated Yoon Suk Yeol will produce a meaningfully new way to handle a nuclear threat that has bedeviled the allies for decades.

There's worry in Seoul that Washington is slipping back to the Obama administration's "strategic patience" policy of ignoring North Korea until it demonstrates seriousness about denuclearization, an approach that was criticized for neglecting the North as it made huge strides in building its nuclear arsenal.

U.S. and South Korean intelligence officials say North Korea may welcome Biden to the region — he's also visiting Japan — with a ballistic missile test or its first detonation of a nuclear device since 2017.

There's little chance of any real nuclear diplomacy. North Korea has ignored South Korean and U.S. offers of assistance after its admission of a COVID-19 outbreak last week, dashing hopes that such cooperation could help ease nuclear tensions or even lead to talks.

Yoon, a conservative former prosecutor who took office on May 10, has said he wants to strengthen ties with Washington while enhancing South Korea's missile strike and defense capabilities. He has also called for the resumption of large-scale U.S.-South Korean military exercises. Those were downsized or suspended over virus worries and during ultimately fruitless nuclear talks between former President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Biden may raise with Yoon a desire for a broader role from South Korea in the alliance, moving away from a focus mostly on North Korea as U.S. foreign policy attention shifts toward confronting China and Russia.

Yoon will likely use the meeting with Biden to declare South Korea's participation in the Indo Pacific Economic Framework, a new U.S.-led regional partnership aimed at promoting cooperation in trade, supply chain resiliency, technology and other issues. That will almost certainly anger China, South Korea's largest trading partner.

Yoon also will seek a robust statement from Biden reaffirming a U.S. commitment to provide "extended deterrence" to South Korea and a vow to defend its ally with its full range of military capabilities, including nuclear weapons, in the event of war with North Korea, said Go Myong-hyun, an analyst at Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

Prolonging the stalemate in diplomacy, North Korea has rejected repeated U.S. offers of open-ended talks. The Biden administration has shown no willingness to remove crippling economic sanctions against North Korea unless it accepts meaningful cutbacks to an arsenal Kim Jong Un sees as his strongest guarantee of survival.

Yoon may seek to defuse worries in Seoul that Washington is ignoring the North Korean threat.

"For South Korea, it's crucial to protect itself from North Korea's nuclear missiles, so Seoul is hoping that the United States will show more aggressive and substantial action to resolve the North Korean threat," said Moon Seong Mook, an analyst at South Korea's Korea Research Institute for National Strategy.

The United States, for its part, wants strengthened security cooperation with South Korea and Japan, Moon said, and a stronger role for Seoul in the region.

As a presidential candidate, Yoon criticized liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in's foreign policy, describing his warm approach to North Korea as "subservient" and accusing him of undermining South Korea's alliance with the United States and of being too soft on China.

But now that Yoon is president, he's unlikely to try to alienate China or pressure North Korea too much, said Kim Yeol Soo, an expert at South Korea's Korea Institute for Military Affairs.

Yoon should instead try to keep alive the possibility of a dialogue with North Korea while consulting with the United States over ways to better cope with the North Korean threat, Kim Yeol Soo said. Challenges posed by North Korea's escalating COVID-19 crisis and its decaying economy may eventually provide new diplomatic opportunities to keep its nuclear advancement in check, he said.

North Korea's state media have reported nearly 2 million suspected COVID-19 cases and 63 deaths a week after it acknowledged an omicron outbreak last Thursday. The situation is almost certainly worse because the country lacks virus tests and other health care resources and may be underreporting deaths to soften the political impact on Kim Jong Un.

South Korea's spy agency told lawmakers Thursday that North Korea will likely seek help from its main ally, China, but may reach out to the United States or South Korea as a last resort, according to Ha Tae-keung, one of the lawmakers who attended the closed-door briefing.

The United States and South Korea have long struggled to find effective ways to counter destabilizing threats from the North.

North Korea has tested missiles 16 separate times this year, including, in March, when its first flight of an intercontinental ballistic missile since 2017 demonstrated a potential range including the entire U.S. mainland.

It is also expanding its arsenal of short-range solid-fuel missiles targeting South Korea, which hosts about 28,500 U.S. troops. Kim Jong Un recently warned that North Korea would proactively use nuclear weapons if threatened or provoked, suggesting an escalation in its nuclear doctrine.

“What we need now is a kind of strengthened deterrence that prevents provocations, rather than the kind that reacts to them after they happen,” said Kim Hyun-wook, a professor at Seoul's Korea National Diplomatic Academy.

Some South Korean conservatives have called for the government to ask the United States to bring nuclear weapons back to South Korea after removing them in the 1990s.

“But more effective and plausible options for Seoul and Washington include restoring combined field exercises, better coordinating defense procurement, and regularizing trilateral security cooperation with Tokyo,” said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul.