



Japan, South Korea and the US Elections

by Dr. Alon Levkowitz

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,315, October 15, 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The US presidential election in November 2024 will have a major impact on Asia. It will influence the US military presence as well as the balance of power in the region, and will affect the economies of the Asian countries. Joe Biden's decision to leave the race and the elevation of Kamala Harris as the Democratic Party candidate have forced Tokyo and Seoul to recalculate their policies towards Washington and the region.

Even before Joe Biden decided to withdraw from the upcoming US presidential election, Seoul and Tokyo had begun to evaluate their policies toward the November ballot. They began discussions with both candidates' teams and tried to finalize several issues with the Biden administration, such as cost-sharing of US forces stationed in Korea and Japan, purchasing US weapons, intelligence cooperation, and the trilateral cooperation between Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington that was agreed upon at Camp David in 2023. The health of the Camp David spirit will depend on the identities of both the new Japanese prime minister following Fumio Kishida's retirement and the new US president following the election. The current South Korean and Japanese administrations estimate that tensions that have arisen regarding an understanding on specific topics related to their security will decrease if Trump wins the election.

From the point of view of Seoul and Tokyo, the new administration in Washington – whether Trump's or Harris's – will have to deal with current issues in Asia that Japan and South Korea see as security and economic threats: the North Korean

nuclear and ballistic threat, the cost of the US deployment in Asia, and the Chinese threat.

The North Korean threat: Donald Trump was the only US president to turn the nuclear disarmament of North Korea into a possibility. However, the euphoria created by the Singapore summit collapsed at the Hanoi summit, when both sides failed to implement what had been agreed upon in Singapore. Washington and Pyongyang interpreted the Singapore Declaration differently. While Kim Jong-un thought the sanctions on North Korea would be lifted prior to the disarming process, Trump thought the sanctions would be lifted after disarmament had been accomplished.

The Biden administration also failed to disarm North Korea's nuclear weapons or halt its missile program. Other than condemning North Korea or attempting to impose sanctions, Washington and its allies in Asia have done nothing to prevent North Korea from continuing its military program. They failed as well to convince China and Russia to implement the sanctions. Kim Jong-un, meanwhile, has said that the nuclear deal is no longer on the table, which makes the challenge of disarming North Korea more complicated.

The Democratic Party platform does not include the disarming of North Korea as a goal. One could reasonably anticipate that if Kamala Harris is elected president, her policy towards North Korea will be an extension of Biden's unless North Korea escalates its threats to the stability of the region. If Trump is elected, he might try to initiate another summit with Kim, but it will be more difficult this time to convince Kim to give up his nuclear arsenal. The Japanese and South Korean governments support the nuclear and missile disarmament of North Korea, but both governments will oppose any policy by Washington that might escalate tensions with Pyongyang.

Sharing the burden of US forces in Asia: Seoul and Tokyo estimate that Trump's election would lead to increased pressure on them to expand their share of the financial burden of US forces that are deployed in Korea and Japan. If Harris wins, this pressure will likely be less harsh, but they will still be expected to increase their share of the burden. Both states are negotiating with the Biden administration on this matter, and Tokyo and Seoul are hastening the upgrading of their military

forces. Tokyo has almost doubled its defense budget and Seoul has decided to increase its own as well (to a lesser degree). Both states will continue to increase their purchase of US weapons to upgrade their defense forces regardless of who wins the election. This reflects internal political changes, but also their fear that the alliance with Washington is not solid enough to deter regional threats.

China: South Korea's and Japan's relations with China are very complicated. On the one hand, China is their biggest trading partner – but on the other, China competes with their industries in the same markets. China poses a military threat to US allies in the region and is trying to change the regional balance of power between Washington and Beijing in Asia and the balance of power with its allies. During the Trump administration, the trade war between Washington and Beijing increased tensions in the region, as Seoul and Tokyo were pressured by the US and China to take a stand.

During Biden's tenure in the White House, this tension eased, but a potential conflict between China and Taiwan has raised concerns in Tokyo and Seoul. If China invades Taiwan, will the US intervene, and what would be the implications for its allies in the region? South Korea and Japan will continue to strengthen their multilateral cooperation with regional allies to balance China and will continue their dialogue with Beijing and Washington to prevent an escalation. They will also need to adjust their industrial policies due to a shift in US policy to decrease America's dependence on China's markets, especially on critical materials and technologies. This change in policy is likely to be implemented by either Trump or Harris.

Dr. Alon Levkowitz is a senior lecturer in Asian Studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.