

PCI Board member Professor Chung-in Moon's interview with the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) on NK nuke was published on 2/7/2017.



APLN's Chung-in Moon on U.S. Policy Toward Asia and the North Korea Nuclear Threat

In his first trip as U.S. Secretary of Defense, Gen. James Mattis last week visited U.S. allies South Korea and Japan, and both governments were eager to discuss the U.S. role in Asia under the new Trump Administration. The visit came amid rising concerns about North Korea and speculation that its [nuclear capabilities](#) are more advanced than previously believed. Mattis reassured Seoul and Tokyo that U.S. defense commitments in East Asia were “ironclad” and promised an “effective and overwhelming response” should North Korea launch a nuclear attack.

Here, in his first interview for Atomic Pulse, Professor Chung-in Moon, co-convenor of NTI's partner, the [Asia-Pacific Leadership Network](#) (APLN), talks about priorities for the APLN, the threat posed by North Korea and why a serious attempt at dialogue is the best course of action to reduce threats.

What are the top priorities for the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network?

The APLN aims to inform and energize public opinion, including high-level policymakers, to take seriously the very real threats posed by nuclear weapons. Current top priorities include the North Korean nuclear problem, a potential nuclear domino situation in the Northeast, growing nuclear and conventional tension between India and Pakistan, nuclear weapon free zones across the Asia-Pacific, preservation of the NPT regime, and nuclear terrorism.

How do you think the new U.S. administration will change U.S. policies toward Asia, and how will that impact the region?

It's too early to conclude the nature and direction of President Trump's policy on Asia, but it appears likely that the overall strategic landscape in Asia-Pacific will drastically change during the Trump administration. His handling of China (questioning the 'One China' policy and the dispute over the South China Sea) could intensify U.S.-China confrontation, which could in turn resurrect and strengthen the Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia' but under a different label. In fact, Defense Secretary James Mattis' surprising visit to Seoul and Tokyo last week can be seen as a signal to consolidate old alliance politics to counter-balance China's rise.

However, Trump could also overhaul the U.S.-led alliance architecture in Northeast Asia. During the campaign, he repeatedly stressed that Japan and South Korea have been free riders in alliance relations and that he will reduce or withdraw American troops stationed in those countries unless they pay an increased share of joint defense burdens

and costs. In addition, the Trump administration could deal a critical blow to the existing liberal trade order in the region. The U.S. has already withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership. Trump has also pledged to scrutinize bilateral trade relations with countries in the region and is likely to amend or discard the KORUS free trade arrangement, while imposing severe import restrictions on China, Japan, and South Korea, which would not only precipitate tense trade disputes, but also undercut American leadership in regional trade regime.

How serious is the threat posed by North Korea?

Pyongyang poses serious nuclear threats to South Korea and Japan, if not the U.S. mainland, as well as American soldiers and military facilities stationed in Japan and South Korea. In addition, a nuclear North Korea, if unchecked, can not only trigger a nuclear domino phenomenon in Northeast Asia, but also poses a grave threat to global security through the proliferation of its nuclear materials and weapons.

International pressures and sanctions notwithstanding, Kim Jong Un has made it clear that he will not jettison the *Byungjin* (simultaneous pursuit of economic development and nuclear weapons). Thus, nuclear and missile development will continue as his policy priorities. North Korean leadership could temporarily halt the nuclear and missile development but is not likely to return to a negotiation table with denuclearization as a precondition.



Chung-in Moon

How sophisticated is North Korea's nuclear program?

I believe North Korea has significantly advanced its nuclear and missile program. According to a recent survey by Sigfried Hecker, a renowned nuclear weapons expert, North Korea might have secured sufficient fissile materials for four to eight plutonium weapons and six to 20 HEU weapons with an annual production capacity of at most one

plutonium weapon and possibly six HEU weapons. This is an alarming development. In addition, Pyongyang announced in January 2016 that it tested a hydrogen bomb (although its reliability is still being questioned). This signifies a deeper dimension of sophistication regarding the diversification of its nuclear weapons capability.

North Korea is known to have developed an array of delivery capability ranging from short-range Scud B and C (range 300km-500km) and Nodong (range 1,000km) to Musudan intermediate range missile (3,000km). The Scud B and C, as well as Nodong missiles, are currently operational, but the operational effectiveness of Musudan has been questioned because four out of its five previous test launchings have so far failed. Kim Jong Un recently stated that North Korea is in the final stage of developing ICBMs. However, most experts question this. More worrisome is North Korea's acquisition of Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles, which some believe would be a game changer.

North Korea has also conducted five nuclear tests of which four were partially or generally successful. Pyongyang is likely to engage in more nuclear testing in order to develop its capability to miniaturize nuclear devices. In fact, the North publicly announced it has succeeded in miniaturizing nuclear warheads, although most experts also doubt this.

How would you advise the new U.S. administration deal with North Korea?

Pressure and sanctions in close cooperation with American allies and the U.N. should be an immediate reaction. [William Perry](#) in his [recent column in *The Washington Post*](#) urged the Trump administration to “talk first, get tough later.” I agree with him. I believe engagement, dialogue, and negotiations with North Korea are still the most credible way of handling Pyongyang. Obama's strategic patience policy failed simply because pressure and sanctions outweighed engagement and dialogue, which in turn demolished the foundation for mutual trust building. Nevertheless, past failure should not serve as an excuse for not engaging with the North.

President Trump should open channels of communication with the North and dispatch a high-powered special envoy to Pyongyang. He also needs to have an inter-subjective understanding of North Korea, which is essential to trust-building, and to avoid the folly of demonizing the North. And incentives and disincentives should be flexibly presented. As [Sam Nunn aptly points out in his statement to Congress](#), President Trump should seek “a unified policy approach to North Korea from our allies, from China, from Russia and the international community, including the United Nations.” Finally, he should send a clear and optimistic message to North Korea and the world that the North Korean nuclear quagmire can be peacefully resolved. Trump should apply ideas embodied in his book ‘The Art of Deal’ in dealing with Pyongyang.

Could a preemptive strike to North Korea be a viable option to deal with North Korea’s nuclear crisis?

No, because it would not necessarily achieve the desired military and political objectives. Destroying North Korea’s nuclear assets (nuclear facilities, materials, and warheads) that are concealed in various places, as well as its mobile missile-launching sites, will not be easy. Given the heavily fortified command-and-control system, targeting and decapitating the country’s political leadership will be virtually impossible. Meanwhile, North Korea’s massive retaliatory capabilities and subsequent escalation of military conflict would entail grave human casualties in the south.

Removing the North Korean leader will also be extremely difficult, and even if he is removed, another dictator is likely to take over. The same can be said of regime change. The collapse of the Kim Jong Un regime does not necessarily mean the end of DPRK as a sovereign state. The military or military-party collective leadership can easily replace the Kim regime, and the would-be new leadership is likely to reveal the same behavior. Mass uprising could bring about an abrupt end to the regime, but at present seems very unlikely.

Have sanctions against North Korea been effective?

Despite the adoption of [UN Security Council Resolution 2270](#), North Korea shows no signs of compliance. On the contrary, its behavior has become more defiant, conducting a fifth nuclear test and additional missile tests. Since North Korea is still a closed society and very much accustomed to sanctions, an Iranian model of comprehensive sanctions would not work effectively.

Given that over 90% of North Korea's trade is with China, international sanctions cannot be effective without Beijing's full cooperation. China has been complying with measures mandated by UN Security Council resolutions but would not want to go ahead with any sanctions that would undermine stability in the North and lead to regime collapse. At the same time, Beijing is unlikely to comply with a secondary boycott which U.S. Congress is currently discussing.

Will the US THAAD missile defense shield help slow North Korea's nuclear and missile development? What have been the reactions to THAAD in South Korea?

THAAD will **not** help slow North Korea's nuclear and missile development. It is a defensive system without any deterrence or offensive defense functions. It cannot compel the North to change its behavior. On the contrary, its deployment will make the North more provocative and seek ways to avoid or defy it more actively than ever.

South Korea has been divided over the issue of THAAD. A poll from late December showed 61 percent of South Korean respondents either opposing its deployment or preferring to delay deployment until the new government is inaugurated.

Conservative forces led by the ruling Saenuri Party have argued that the THAAD deployment is the right decision. They regard it as an unavoidable self-defense measure to cope with nuclear and missile threats from North Korea and a concrete sign of the U.S.

alliance commitment. Meanwhile, liberal and progressive forces led by opposition parties have taken a much tougher stance calling for the immediate relinquishment of the decision. This faction argues that THAAD has limited military utility and believes its deployment will not only harm relations with China, South Korea's vital economic partner, but also pit China and Russia against South Korea while strengthening their ties with North Korea. Opposition groups see the deployment of THAAD as a prelude to Seoul's joining a U.S.-led theater missile defense system, which could in turn revive a new Cold War structure in Northeast Asia. Given such formidable domestic political opposition, the scheduled THAAD deployment might not be smooth.

What is China's approach to dealing with North Korea?

China is an important player in the North Korean endgame not only because it is a legal party to the Korean armistice agreement, but also because Pyongyang depends heavily on Beijing in the economic and even security domain. Beijing's behavior will be guided by its three core objectives on the Korean peninsula: peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, and resolution of pending issues through dialogue and negotiation. China will play a proactive and cooperative role when and if those three objectives are satisfied. But Beijing will be extremely defiant over American moves to precipitate escalation of military conflict or to undermine stability by fostering regime collapse in the North.

If the United States were to suspend its opposition to a nuclear Japan or South Korea would this enhance security for these countries and the region?

No, such suspension would further complicate the security dilemma in Northeast Asia by not only precipitating a nuclear domino syndrome, but also deepening strategic distrust among countries in the region. Moreover, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan will find an easy excuse to develop nuclear weapons if the U.S. lifts its opposition. They have technology and capital to do so.

A growing number of analysts in South Korea argue that Seoul should develop an indigenous nuclear arms program to deal with Pyongyang's nuclear threat and urge the government to go nuclear if the United States does not redeploy its tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea. But as soon as South Korea declares its intention to pursue this course it will face strong headwinds. The nation's nuclear power industry would be ruined, as would the country's traditional alliance with the United States. The South Korean economy would risk being dealt international sanctions that could send it into a tailspin. Moreover, South Korea going nuclear could be a tipping point that leads other countries in Northeast Asia, namely Japan, to develop their own nuclear arsenals.

Would the U.S. benefit from a nuclear armed Japan or South Korea?

A nuclear armed Northeast Asia will not benefit the United States. Judged on the overall public sentiments in Washington, D.C., it will be extremely difficult for the U.S. to maintain alliances with a nuclear Japan and/or South Korea. Such a development will likely lead to a loss of American allies in the region. More importantly, the U.S. will lose its 'hegemonic' influence over the region. Japan and South Korea armed with nuclear weapons are not likely to comply with American demands. They would comply only when extended deterrence and American provision of nuclear umbrella remain valid and operational.

How could a diplomatic approach to North Korea be carried out?

First, the diplomatic approach must be practical and realistic. Goals for negotiations must be adjusted to changing circumstances. We must face the reality that we cannot make North Korea completely dismantle its nuclear weapons and facilities in the short term. Instead, we should seek a moratorium on its nuclear program to prevent further production of nuclear materials. Pyongyang repeatedly said it would cease nuclear activities if terms were met. In this regard, Siegfried Hecker's step-by-step approach of "freeze, roll-back, and verifiably dismantle" might provide us with a viable exit strategy.

Practical ways to resolve the North Korean nuclear conundrum might be found in existing agreements that emerged from the six-party talks.

Second, frankness, two-way understanding, and trust-building should be the basic guiding principles of a diplomatic approach. We must speak our minds and also hear out Pyongyang in order to find mutually acceptable solutions. Being deaf to the North and insisting on unilateral preconditions won't lead us to an exit. Portraying the North as an untrustworthy rogue state will only reinforce the perception that relations are asymmetrical, hindering meaningful dialogue and negotiation.

Third, flexible negotiations should be another guideline. We must put all possible cards on the table, including a temporary halt to joint South Korea–U.S. military drills, replacement of armistice with a peace treaty, allowance of North Korea's peaceful use of atomic energy and space/satellite program, and normalization of diplomatic relations between North Korea and the United States. We must not exclude these options just because they are being demanded by Pyongyang. While addressing issues through dialogue, we could probe Pyongyang's intentions and demand responsibility for any breach of faith.

Finally, a mechanism for dialogue should be restored. In this regard, the six-party talks are still the best venue for negotiation. Concerned parties can have bilateral, trilateral, four-party, and five-party talks within the six-party framework. In addition, the September 19 joint statement is still the best diplomatic document for denuclearizing North Korea. Deliberating on alternative mechanisms for dialogue and negotiation will be time-consuming.

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