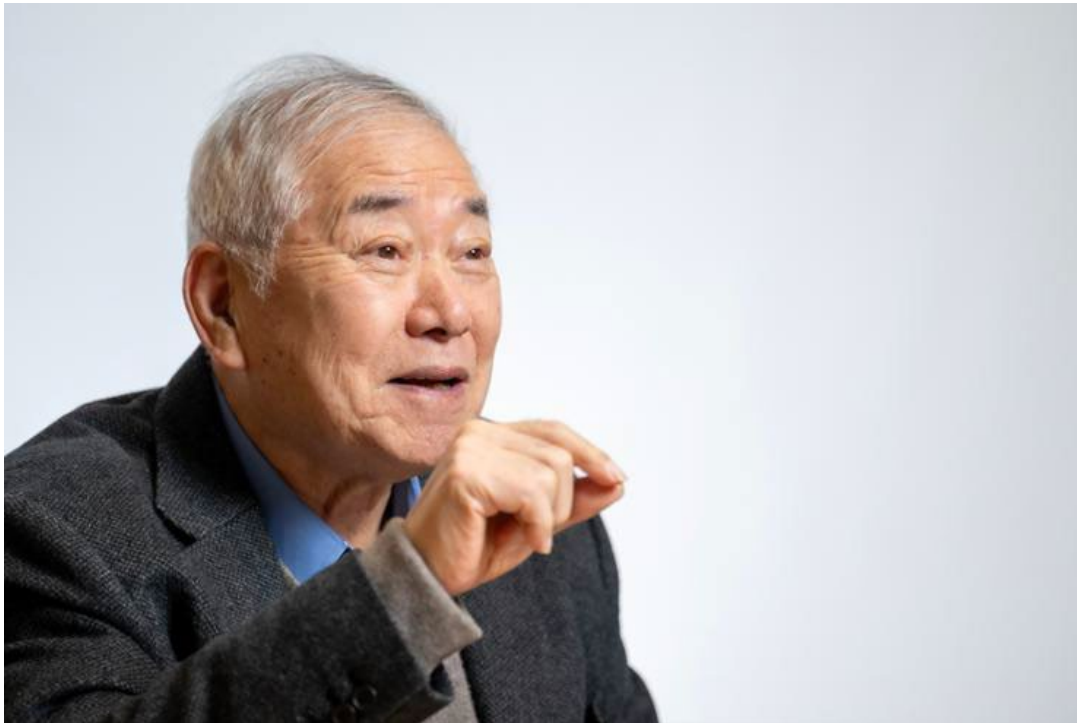


INTERVIEW China's growing role and US foreign policy: S. Korea's options in shifting world order



Moon Chung-in, the James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University / Korea Times photo by Shim Hyun-chul

By **Shim Jae-yun**

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Korea Times chief editorial writer Shim Jae-yun sat down with Moon Chung-in, the James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University, on Sunday to discuss U.S. President Donald Trump's foreign policy and its impacts on South Korea and East Asia. The interview was held on the occasion of the publication of Moon's new book, titled "Why Has U.S. Diplomacy Failed?"

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

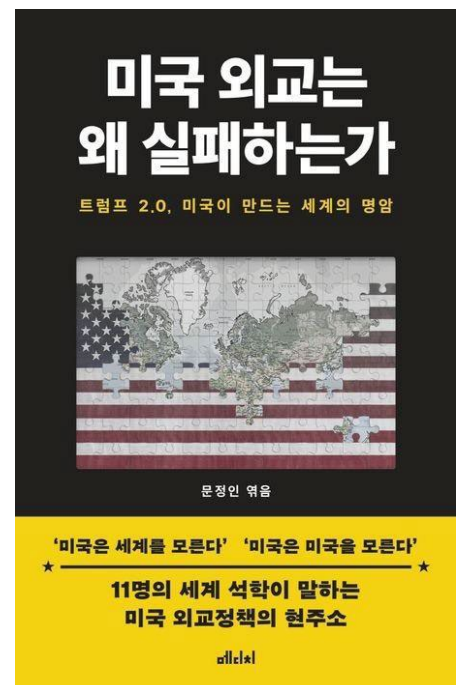
Q: China will be likely playing a pivotal role in the newly emerging international order. What is the nature of American domestic debates on China? The Trump administration has been treating its European allies in a hostile manner, and the future

of NATO has become uncertain. Does it mean the U.S. will be paying more attention to China and Asia?

A: Yes, it is stunning to see how the Trump administration has been treating its European allies. "European defense by Europeans" reminds me of the Nixon doctrine in which President Nixon proposed the policy of "Asian defense by Asians" in 1969. Nixon and Kissinger were much gentler than Trump, Vance and Hegseth. Some in Trump 2.0 are even suggesting the relinquishment of American supreme commandship in NATO, implying the devastating impacts on the future of the trans-Atlantic alliance system.

I don't know if the policy shift will mean diverting American strategic attention away from Europe and the Middle East to China and Asia. Asian hawks such as Eldridge Colby, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, will welcome the shift because he firmly believes in the denial and containment of China as the top U.S. priority. Nevertheless, American primacists and traditional realists who are still powerful in Washington will think differently. For them, the defense of Europe is as important as the containment of China. There will be fierce internal debates between the two lines of strategic thinking.

In the wake of handling the Ukraine issue, another line of strategic thinking has recently surfaced. That is the "sphere of influence" and the concert of power thinking reminiscent of the 19th-century power politics in Europe. According to this line of thinking, the Western hemisphere would belong to the U.S., whereas Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, to the Russian sphere of influence. To follow this logic, the U.S. may well recognize the Chinese sphere of influence over Northeast and Southeast Asia. The U.S., China and Russia would engage in power sharing and mutual consultation to ensure peace and stability. But I doubt Trump 2.0 would recognize the Chinese sphere of influence. There are strong neo-con elements in the Republican circle who are willing to risk war for the spread of American values. They will strongly oppose China, and Trump cannot easily ignore their voices. In fact, Marco Rubio, secretary of state, and Michael Waltz, national security advisor, were all



The cover of Moon Chung-in's new book, "Why Has U.S. Foreign Policy Failed?"

China hawks with a strong neo-con flavor before their conversion to MAGA. I think anti-China voices will increase under Trump 2.0.

Q: Since the end of World War II, the U.S. has remained an undisputed hegemonic leader in the world by creating and sustaining the liberal international order. But Trump 2.0 has withdrawn from WHO and the Paris Climate Accord. It has also decided to suspend membership due payment to the WTO. Some Republicans in the U.S. Congress have even called for its withdrawal from the United Nations. Does this mean the end of the America-led liberal international order?

A: Yes, they are worrisome moves signaling the end of the liberal international order that is characterized by rules-based international governance, democracy and human rights. The U.N, GATT/WTO and the Bretton Woods monetary system were all American creations under its hegemonic leadership. It is ironic to witness its disruption and even destruction by its own creator, the U.S. Seeking protectionist policies, disregarding the free trading system, withdrawing from the WHO and the climate accord and relinquishing its leadership in aid and development in the developing world are the surest ways to their dissolution.

Trump is known as a "sovereign decisionist" who favors individual military build-up, territorial expansionism and mercantilism in pursuit of wealth, power and prosperity, as well as the disregard of international norms and rules. The liberal international order will suffer under his reign. Nevertheless, it seems too premature to write an epitaph. The order has its own merits and inertia, and a great number of countries have benefitted from it. The world without the U.S. may try to save and sustain it.



U.S. President Donald Trump looks on during an executive order signing in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington, Monday. UPI-Yonhap

Q: America's alleged retrenchment seems obvious. Which country can replace the U.S. on the world stage? Does China have the capability, intention and political will to play the role of hegemon in sustaining the liberal international order?

A: China has been the greatest beneficiary of the liberal international order, although it has different conceptions of democracy and human rights. Thus, it has every reason to sustain rather than replace it. Chinese President Xi Jinping has proposed three global initiatives: global development, security and civilization. I do not see any major contradictions between his initiatives and the liberal international order since Xi emphasizes common development, inclusive, cooperative and collective security and civilizational harmony among different cultural spheres. He pays greater attention to the U.N. and the role of multilateral cooperation. All of these are the prerequisites for the liberal international order.

However, China will be hesitant to undertake hegemonic leadership replacing the U.S. China is almost allergic to the term "hegemony" as it has long championed an anti-hegemonic stance. China does not have any intention to exercise hegemonic leadership comparable to that of the U.S. Moreover, immense domestic challenges such as a sagging economy, deteriorating income, declining wealth, regional polarization and democratic pressures from below and secessionist movements in the periphery will certainly dampen Xi's political will to cast hegemonic power. And I don't think China has the capability to provide public goods essential for the exercise of hegemonic leadership as the U.S. did. China will try to seek evolutionary stability by selectively bandwagoning the liberal international order rather than revoking and replacing it. In that way, China can enjoy more benefits with lower costs.

Q: Apparently, you do not see the rise of the Chinese century. What does China have in mind? What kinds of international order does China envisage?

A: The idea of the Chinese century seems somewhat far-fetched. Neither the old tributary system nor the Chinese empire will be revived. Pax Sinica resembling Pax Americana seems highly unlikely. China has also given up the G2 notion in which China and the U.S. exercise bi-hegemonic leadership. Instead, it currently seeks cooperation among major powers through the Group of 20, BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Owing to its economic power, a China-centric system will be possible in which countries in the region can gravitate toward it. We cannot rule out the possibility of fierce competition between China and the U.S. But Xi has been underscoring the importance of a win-win rather than a zero-sum outcome.

Q: Will Trump 2.0 risk a major war with China for the protection of Taiwan? Will the doctrine of strategic ambiguity be honored during Trump 2.0? Can the U.S. build a credible regional coalition of the willing to protect Taiwan?

A: A lot of American Asia experts whom I met recently in the U.S. have raised such a possibility. They were telling me that “the Taiwan crisis is coming soon.” Some suggest 2027, the year of the 100th anniversary of the People's Liberation Army's founding, and others earlier than that. But I do not agree with this prediction. Trump is smart enough not to risk war with China, and Xi is also pragmatic enough to avoid the war. They have very little to gain through military actions and war. In this sense, Trump is likely to uphold the policy of strategic ambiguity. Compared with Trump 1.0, he has so far taken a surprisingly low profile on the Taiwan issue. Although military tension exists in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea, two big powers will be able to manage conflict escalation.

It will not be easy for the U.S. to build a regional coalition willing to protect Taiwan. Japan, the Philippines and Australia may join the coalition because their strategic interests are at stake. However, South Korea and ASEAN countries are not likely to join it. As a treaty ally, South Korea is obliged to render military support to the U.S. in the case of a military conflict in Taiwan, but a majority of its citizens will oppose any direct military involvement precisely because of impending North Korean threats.

Q: How about the Korean Peninsula in the China-US strategic rivalry?

A: The China-US rivalry has been posing a major existential dilemma to South Korea. Theoretically speaking, there are several choices: pro-American balancing, bandwagoning China, standing alone and maintaining the status quo via muddling through. The most ideal seems to be the status quo scenario in which South Korea maintains the alliance with the U.S., while enhancing strategic cooperative partnership with China. But worsening Beijing-Washington ties have narrowed the scope of this kind of diplomatic maneuvering. In this circumstance, Seoul might have to strengthen its alliance ties with Washington because of constant threats from the North, but it should take more prudent moves not to provoke China. Dr. Henry Kissinger once told me, “China is big and near. You should not alienate or antagonize China.” We should keep his advice in mind. At the same time, we should cooperate with other middle powers in finding diplomatic solutions to prevent conflict escalation between China and the U.S.

Q: How will Trump's handling of North Korea affect the national interests of South Korea? What stance should South Korea take?

A: President Trump can affect South Korea's national interests in four different ways. First, he can bring the denuclearization of North Korea and a lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula through a big deal with North Korea. Second, as the episode of fire and fury of the summer of 2017 shows, he can undertake military actions against North Korea, leading to the outbreak of a war in Korea when and if North Korea miscalculates Trump's intention and triggers a military clash with the U.S. Third, amidst President Trump's lack of attention to the Korean issue, Seoul and Pyongyang could engage in accidental armed conflicts that can escalate into a limited or full-blown military showdown. Finally, the status quo of inter-Korean relations, neither at peace nor war, can continue with high military tension and occasional clashes.

Of the four, the most desirable scenario is the first one. We should make close cooperation with the Trump administration to make a peaceful settlement possible. Scenarios two and third should be avoided at any cost. They will be nightmarish for us. We are all accustomed to the fourth status quo scenario. But we should stop the current status quo from turning into conflict escalation while finding measures to reduce tension, build mutual confidence and turn the existing armistice agreement system into a lasting peace regime through preventive diplomacy.

Q: What is your prediction of the future of U.S. foreign policy? Is the current setback to the world order temporary or irreversible? Will the change of U.S. government in four years alter its foreign policy?

A: It seems very difficult to predict the future of American foreign policy because it is totally up to personal instinct and whims as well as the transactional interest calculation of Trump. Nevertheless, the continuity of American foreign policy will be ultimately determined by the costs and benefit analysis of American citizens. If they feel safer and more prosperous as a result of the Trump policy, they will support its continuity. If the Democratic Party wins the next presidential election, things can change. But one thing is clear: damage is done. It will take considerable time and effort to regain its legitimacy, support and reputation on the world stage.

Q: How should South Korea deal with the rise of a disruptive world order? What suggestions do you have in mind?

A: President Yoon Suk Yeol has wholeheartedly endorsed and implemented liberal international mandates of the Biden administration in the name of "value alliance." Now, the U.S. has abandoned it, posing a major dilemma for South Korea. Seoul is obliged to find alternatives.

I have the following suggestions. First, South Korea has been a great beneficiary of the liberal international order. Thus, it has a historical mandate to revive and sustain that order. Second, as with Europe, South Korea needs to reduce its security dependency on the U.S. and strengthen its self-reliant defense capabilities. Third, it should actively pursue preventive diplomacy to avoid war and prepare for peace. For this, it is essential for Seoul to reactivate dialogue and engagement with Pyongyang. Fourth, the South needs to pay more attention to open regionalism and multilateralism through the pursuit of multilateral diplomacy. Cooperation with other middle powers is indispensable. Please keep in mind that misery does love company. Finally, the South needs to overcome the self-defeating politics of polarization in foreign policy. National consensus on foreign and national security policy is essential for navigating the unknown horizon of an orderless world and regional politics.