

## Security expert urges Korea to lead middle-power coalition

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### **Moon Chung-in calls for action in seeking cooperation among countries 'sandwiched' between US, China**



Moon Chung-in, a James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University and former special adviser to then-President Moon Jae-in for foreign policy and national security, speaks during an interview with The Korea Times in Seoul, Wednesday. Korea Times photo by Choi Won-suk

The idea of cooperation among middle powers has circulated for years, often more in theory than in practice. But Moon Chung-in, a James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University, said the conversation is now entering a more urgent phase.

Speaking in an interview with The Korea Times, Moon said the question is no longer whether such cooperation is desirable, but whether any country is willing to take the lead.

He said Korea should consider playing a more proactive role in uniting middle powers, as the global order becomes increasingly shaped by rivalry between the great powers and transactional diplomacy, with major powers relying on tariffs, financial pressure and security leverage to pursue their national interests.

“There has to be a leader who can bring middle powers together and push a middle-power coalition forward,” said Moon, a former foreign policy and national security adviser to President Moon Jae-in.

Saying that middle powers are effectively “sandwiched” between the U.S. and China, he said this structural vulnerability is the reason why cooperation among them is no longer optional.

Moon said his thinking was shaped in part by recent remarks made by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January. In a speech, Carney warned that middle powers face growing vulnerability as global politics become less predictable and more transactional, and called for like-minded countries to work together through flexible, issue-based coalitions.



U.S. President Donald Trump, left, attends a session at World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Jan. 22. Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney speaks in another session at the forum, Jan. 20. AFP-Yonhap

“The foundation of Carney’s speech comes from what Finnish President (Alexander) Stubb has been talking about,” Moon said. “It’s what he calls ‘value-based realism.’ But what U.S. President Donald Trump is doing right now is not value-based realism.”

He said the idea of a coalition of middle powers is not rooted in ideology, but rather is a practical response to structural changes in global politics.

“The main reason for discussing such a coalition is to ease the U.S.-China confrontation and restore the multilateral order that is now under threat,” Moon said.

He added that cooperation among those countries should avoid exclusive regionalism.

“It’s not about creating closed regional blocs. It’s about moving toward open regionalism and sharing a common goal of preventing the resurgence of mercantilism.”

Moon cautioned, however, that efforts by middle powers to improve relations with China could invite pressure from Washington, such as the U.S. threatening a 100 percent tariff hike on Canadian goods after Carney sought to improve ties with China.

Moon stressed that without concrete follow-up, discussions about middle-power cooperation risk fading quickly. “The logic is there, but if there’s no follow-up, it just disappears,” he said. “If you want to make something happen, you need momentum.”

When asked who could provide the necessary leadership, Moon explicitly mentioned President Lee Jae Myung.

“In my view, Lee is fully capable of doing it,” he said. “Personally, I hoped Lee would take on that role, but it was Prime Minister Carney who raised the issue first in Davos.”



President Lee Jae Myung takes a selfie with Chinese President Xi Jinping after a state dinner at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, Jan. 5. Joint Press Corps

Moon said the biggest challenge for any leader seeking to organize such a coalition would be managing potential retaliation from the U.S., calling it a critical test for Korea as well if Lee were to pursue a leadership role.

He emphasized that his remarks reflected a personal view rather than a formal policy proposal. Still, he said leadership from a sitting head of state would be essential if cooperation among middle powers is to move beyond rhetoric.

“Someone has to bring people together and facilitate dialogue at the presidential level,” he said. “That’s how you create momentum.”

He also emphasized that such a coalition should not be seen as an attempt to sideline major allies or replace existing alliances.

“This is not about excluding anyone or dismantling alliances,” Moon said. “It’s about creating space for middle powers to coordinate, increase their bargaining power and manage shared challenges more effectively.”

Moon added that such coordination could help stabilize global governance at a time when multilateral institutions are losing influence.

“If middle powers don’t step up, the system will continue to tilt even more toward raw power politics,” he said.

Moon said Canada's experience with U.S. tariff pressure shows that even influential political leaders encounter limitations when navigating relations with both Washington and Beijing. He added that balancing alliance management with strategic autonomy would remain a defining challenge.

With uncertainty growing across trade, security and diplomacy, Moon said the cost of inaction is rising.

“This is not a time for simply watching and waiting,” he said. “It’s a time when choices have to be made, and Korea is well positioned to consider making one of those choices.”