The man with a plan for Korean Peninsula peace

Presidential adviser and longtime peacemaker Moon Chung-in tells Asia Times the time is right to bridge the DMZ

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This is the first installment of a three part series

SEOUL – In think-tanks, ivory towers and government agencies in Washington and Seoul lurks that most rarified of wonks: The Pyongyangologist.

He or she has an important specialization, for nuclear-armed North Korea is one of the steepest security challenges of our time. It is also a fascinating one, for the country is an enigma: the most insulated, fenced-off polity and economy in Asia, perhaps the world.
This means the Pyongyangologist cannot hop on a plane to exchange thoughts with colleagues or sources inside North Korea. Nor can he phone or email them. In fact, many of those who make North Korea their career have no single contact within the country.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many Pyongyangologists get it wrong. Most notably, a belief persisted among some, from the early 1990s up to the Barack Obama presidency, that North Korea would implode all by itself.

One member of the community never held that belief: Moon Chung-in. But the South Korean academic towers above the crowd for other reasons.

No man has had a bigger policy influence upon the three liberal South Korean presidents who have chosen to engage the Kims than Moon.

He believes he is the only South Korean who has attended every one of the presidential-level inter-Korean summits: In 2000, 2007 and 2018. At those events, he rubbed shoulders with the mysterious and often-demonized figures whose names light up global headlines: Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Un and Kim Yo Jong.

Currently a special adviser to South Korean President Moon Jae-in (no relation) for national security and foreign affairs and vice-chairman of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, Moon is set to take on the headship of the Sejong Institute, a think-tank specializing in foreign affairs, security and unification, later this month.

In person, Moon looks and acts like the avuncular, slightly rumpled academic that he is. But he is a passionate debater and a forceful speaker. Highly unusually for one who moves in high circles, Moon never holds his tongue and always shoots from the hip.

That has generated controversy. Some on the right, in both South Korea and the United States, consider him an apologist for the northern regime. Below, in Part 1 of a wide-ranging interview, Moon returns fire.

He lays out the argument for engagement and, deploying personal anecdote, dissects the different governing styles of the late Kim Jong Il and his son and current leader Kim Jong Un. He also gives his opinion on the latter’s high-profile sister, Kim Yo Jong, and explains why North Korea will not collapse: it is here to stay.
Moon Chung-in holds forth at a conference. The South Korean academic has been a key behind-the-scenes player in the North-South summity of the last two decades. Photo: Courtesy of Moon Chung-in

The ‘historical mandate’

Moon says his decades-long efforts to create a working *modus vivendi* with North Korea are “existential motivation.”

He admits that many consider him a “liberal idealist or a North Korean sympathizer” but describes himself as “a progressive realist.” “Morality and law are beautiful, but we are stuck with reality,” he said. “My argument is we should start with the Korean reality.”

That reality is a nuclear armed – and very stable – North Korea. “Kim Jong Un has consolidated political power,” he said. “So if your aim with North Korea is changing the regime, it won’t work.”

Though many around the world believe dictatorships are destined for inevitable collapse, three generations of Kims have deeply entrenched their regime. “It is unprecedented, we should not take these factors lightly,” Moon said. “That is why we should take North Korea as it is, not as we wish to see it.

For these reasons Moon is probably the highest-profile champion of engaging North Korea. “If you want peace, you have got to talk to your adversary,” he said. “It’s very simple: We need
engagement for peace! We need it for prosperity!”

Peace is critical. All of South Korea lies within range of North Korea’s nuclear delivery systems, and would likely suffer Carthaginian devastation and loss of life even in a conventional war.

“This is our time for engagement for peace! We need it for prosperity!” Moon asked. “We need it for prosperity!”

The problem, as he sees it, is “we are now more familiar with insecurity than security...we have been hypnotized with this Cold War mentality,” he said. “We should awaken from this.”

Regarding prosperity, a core ambition is to reconnect South Korea – essentially, a geopolitical island separated from Eurasia by North Korea – to the continent.

“Since the beginning of the Cold War, the Korean peninsula was divided and South Korea was a paralyzed peninsula ... we ended up as a maritime country,” he said. “It is very natural to want to go to the continent, to ride on the trans-Siberian railroad, the trans-China railroad, to actively develop the Siberian area to create a new niche for our prosperity.”

It is to these ends that Moon had been retained to advise three South Korean presidents on their North Korea policy: Kim Dae-jung (in power: 1998-2003), Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) and incumbent Moon Jae-in (2017 to the present). He attended all four inter-Korean summits, which he considers “extremely successful.”
Into the Kimdom

He has vivid memories of the first, in 2000. At the time, North Korea was “mystifying and demonized and completely isolated – but President Kim Dae-jung went there and met Kim Jong Il and opened new horizons of dialog and engagement,” Moon said. “We were worried Kim Jong Il might not show, but he showed up [at the airport] and we were really welcomed.”

Moon’s role was executive secretary for the 22 South Korean non-government delegates, including senior figures from business and media. The first meeting did not go well.

“Kim Yong Nam, the chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People’s Congress, was taking a very hardline position on inter-Korean issues, including the status of US forces in the South – he was a sort of ideologue,” Moon said. “The first day was very cold, but we knew this was their strategy.”
The second day, Kim Jong Il personally showed up at dinner, and the two Korean leaders worked on the June 15 joint declaration. “It was a very, very good mood,” Moon said. “The third day was a farewell lunch hosted by Kim Jong Il, I think that was the climax of the summit – there was no agenda.”

The late North Korean leader Kim Jong Il (left) and the late South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun (second from left) raise their glasses with Moon Chung-in (center) during the second inter-Korean summit in 2007. Photo courtesy of Moon Chung-in.

The no-agenda lunch may have typical of Kim, the second leader of North Korea, who took on power after his father, state founder Kim Il Sung, died in 1994. “Kim Jong Il was really impromptu,” Moon said. “And he had really extensive knowledge.”

Perhaps surprisingly, Kim also had a dry sense of humor.

Prior to the summit, the message had been passed down that reporters in the South Korean delegation who were particularly critical of North Korea would not be permitted in. However, President Kim made the decision that the full delegation would travel or the summit would be off. They headed north.

Korea Broadcasting System president Park Gwon-sang was deeply worried about the safety of the KBS news crew, Moon recalled. During the farewell lunch, Park refrained from toasting
and singing. Moon was asked to present Park to Kim Jong Il.

“I introduced him and Kim quipped, ‘Ah, Mr Park, I always watch KBS.’ So I said to Kim, ‘The two other [South Korean] TV stations will be very unhappy about your remarks,’ and Kim said, ‘I have a habit of watching state-owned TV!’”

Kim also revealed that he was a keen watcher of CNN.

Former North Korean leader Kim Jong Il (front left) and his son Kim Jong Un talk as they visit Mokran Video Company in Pyongyang in this undated image. Photo: KCNA

**Kim Sr, Kim Jr**
Kim Jong Un took power after father Kim Jong Il passed away in 2011. Moon first met the youthful leader at the Panmunjom summit in April 2018. “Kim was very normal, he showed respect and humility to [President] Moon Jae-in,” Moon recalled. “His wife was a very charming lady – very quiet.”

The younger Kim takes a different approach to his father’s governance – which Moon characterizes as “ad hoc.”

“Competition among party and state agencies and sometimes between the party and the military was cutthroat – that is how Kim Jong Il ran the system,” Moon said. “Under Kim Jong Un, North Korea’s governing system has become normalized. The Korea Workers’ Party has primacy over the military – unlike under his father.”

The National Defense Commission, with the military playing a major role, was formerly supreme; no party congresses were held under Kim Jong Il. But Under Kim Jong Un, “the party has become the major actor” with two congresses already having taken place.

The party’s Politburo and Central Committee now convene before major decisions. “Normalization of decision-making is one of the key features of the Kim Jong Un era,” Moon said. “Kim Jong Il ran the country in an impromptu way, Kim Jong Un is running it in a much more institutional way.”

This makes the military less prominent, “In both the summits of 2018, I could not see any military folks running the events,” Moon said. “It was party folks, mostly new and young ones.”

This extends to economic matters. Previously, “the party, the military, and the state competitively interfered with economic matters,” Moon said. But after last month’s 8th Party Congress, the cabinet now leads economic matters, “blocking intervention in the economy by the party and the military.”

The two Kims’ approach extend to South Korean relations. “Kim Jong Il talked a lot, he was virtually unconstrained,” with no reliance on briefing notes Moon said. “Kim Jong Un, to my recollection, did not speak a lot, he is responsive rather than proactive.”

Moreover, Kim Jong Il “promised a lot of things, but many times did not deliver,” Moon said. But for his son, performance is all.

“Under Kim Jong Un’s rule, unless your proposal is firm, you are not supposed to submit it to the top,” Moon said. “If Kim accepts it, but the proposers do not deliver, they get punished. Performance is the buzzword.”
Performance is monitored in on-site visits. “He makes rewards and punishment clear,” Moon said. “The monitoring and feedback system has been massively strengthened.”

Cold War: Kim Jong Un in winter dress. Under his rule, the military plays a less prominent role in national politics than it did under his late father. Photo: AFP

**Little sister**

Kim’s sister, Yo Jong, has become the subject of intense media attention – particularly given her apparent turnaround from dove in 2018 to hawk in 2020. Moon is convinced that she advocated improved external relations and has had to adjust her stance following the failure of her brother’s summitry with US President Donald Trump.

In February 2018, the North dispatched a delegation to the South headed by old-time hardliner, Kim Yong Nam, but Kim Yo Jong was special envoy. “I had extensive talks with Kim Yo Jong, she was extremely well mannered,” Moon said. “She did not speak a lot but I was really impressed.”

That visit led to the April 2018 inter-Korean summit, and the good relations paid off with a subsequent summit in Pyongyang in October 2018. There, “those surrounding Kim Jong Un
initially opposed his return visit to Seoul,” Moon said. “It was through Yo Jong’s persuasion that the return visit to Seoul was included.”

To the intense disappointment of the Southern side, that visit never transpired. And following the failure of the Kim-Trump summit in Hanoi in 2019, and the related freeze in inter-Korean relations, Yo Jong, the former engager, has become Pyongyang’s leading critic of South Korea in state media.

“She was kind of a driver of inter-Korean relations and was placed in a difficult position: accountability mattered,” Moon said. Her newly hardline persona, “could have emerged in this context,” he said.

The situation facing his sister suggests that there are even constraints on the supreme leader. Moon believes that he is “a victim of the structure which his grandfather and father created.”

So could Yo Jong inherit if her brother passed away?

“In North Korea, you are not supposed to raise this issue!” he said. “She has the bloodline so she could be the most likely successor, but in North Korea you never talk about the second in power.” He warned, “When you do that, it can bring about a deadly boomerang effect on him or her.”

He cited the late Jang Song Thaek, Kim Jong Un’s uncle, who was executed in 2013 for reasons that remain unclear. His death is believed to be linked to disloyalty, to his massing of economic assets, or possibly his closeness to figures in China.

“Jang Song Thaek was the key figure, but now I don’t see any power players – the top players are mostly technocrats,” Moon said, adding, “I was stunned by what happened to Jang.”

After Kim, Moon believes the party has primacy. “Suppose Kim Jong Un were gone. what would be the most powerful organization in North Korea?” he asked. “The party is in control ... I think the party would decide the successor.”

And this, Moon insists, is why North Korea could – feasibly – survive even without a Kim on its throne.

“North Korea can suffer a policy, government, or even regime collapse, but it will never give up state sovereignty,” Moon said. “If Kim Jong Un goes, there will be party leadership, or collective leadership of party and military.”

The reason for that is simple human self-interest – the same interest that argues against any peaceful absorption by South Korea.

“Why would the vested interests in the North give up their sovereignty that monopolizes material and positional values?” Moon asked.

In Part 2 of this series, to run in Asia Times tomorrow, Moon discusses why he believes Kim is serious about denuclearization; the pros and cons of ex-president Donald Trump’s approach toward Pyongyang; and pragmatic ways for President Joe Biden’s team to improve the situation.