



## At rock bottom: Moon Chung-in surveys the ruins of North Korea diplomacy

In interview, former presidential adviser raises alarm about risk of conflict, laments sidelining of peace advocates

Chad O'Carroll May 31, 2024



*Moon Chung-in at an event in Canberra | Image: Crawford Forum via [Flickr](#) (June 29, 2015) (CC BY 2.0 DEED)*

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula took a turn for the worse this week when North Korea launched [hundreds of balloons](#) transporting a nasty surprise for residents in the South — garbage and manure — framing it as retaliation for anti-regime leafleting by ROK activists.

For Moon Chung-in, a former special adviser to South Korean President Moon Jae-in during the heady days of inter-Korean diplomacy in 2018, it was a depressing spectacle.

“It’s not just an impromptu response to the sending of balloons: They warned, then they showed,” he said, referring to a [statement](#) by the DPRK’s defense minister days before. “But we do not know what will happen next time.”

Still, Moon saw a silver lining in North Korea’s unorthodox tactic.

“Thank God, the North Koreans did not use anti-aircraft guns as they did in the past,” he said. “But this could be the first stage in an escalation.”

In an interview with *NK News* this week at Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity, Moon said the recent balloon barrage is just the latest sign of how far inter-Korean relations have deteriorated since the promising summits of 2018.

“Now we do not have any guard rails: The Comprehensive Military Agreement is nullified, there are no communication channels between the North and South, and there is no back channel diplomacy,” he said referring to the inter-Korean military deal signed in Sept. 2018 that collapsed late last year.

Consequently, Moon said he’s worried “about the extended escalation of clashes into a major military conflict between the North and the South,” urging the two Koreas to show restraint to avoid a potentially disastrous tit-for-tat cycle.

As for who bears ultimate responsibility for the balloon exchange, Moon said there is blame all around, criticizing the South Korean government’s “absurd argument” that civilian balloon launches don’t violate international law while similar actions by the DPRK state do.

He also raised concerns about how conservative President Yoon Suk-yeol will respond, noting Yoon’s hardline views on North Korean “provocations.”

“Given President Yoon and Defense Minister Shin Won-shik’s remarks, it is very likely that South Korea will respond in kind: [If North Korea uses] anti-aircraft guns, then we would use some artillery pieces,” Moon said, stating the situation could spiral out of control.



A ROK army chemical rapid response team investigating a balloon presumed to have been sent from North Korea on the morning of May 29, 2024 | Image: Courtesy of Park Han-sik

## **ANOTHER FLASHPOINT**

In his statement over the weekend, North Korea's vice defense minister accused the U.S. and ROK of infringing on the DPRK's territorial sovereignty over the weekend, including along the maritime border in the Yellow Sea.

This came as many have warned of the risk of friction along the Northern Limit Line (NLL) since Kim Jong Un denounced the de facto border as "[illicit](#)" earlier this year.

And while the NLL has long been a site of tension, Moon Chung-in told *NK News* that he believes history and the DPRK's recent statements make the situation particularly volatile this year.

Moon said the U.S.-led U.N. Command unilaterally drew the NLL after the Korean War armistice in 1953.

"At that time, the South Korean navy was superior to North Korean navy, and the South Korean navy was making intrusions into North Korean waters, he said.

But the legal status of the NLL is ambiguous, and the DPRK has never officially recognized it.

Moon highlighted the complexity of the issue given that five South Korean-controlled islands are located in what North Korea claims as its territorial waters and that ROK ships pass through this area.

"If North Korea is (now) saying that we cannot do that, if North Korea begins to enforce some kind of maritime control, then this will lead to major clashes," he explained, pointing to past incidents like the DPRK's [shelling of Yeonpyeong Island](#) in 2010 as a cautionary tale.

While South Korea currently maintains a significant military advantage over the North, Moon cautioned against complacency, stating the emerging situation is "very worrisome" and serves as a reminder of the need to manage risks through dialogue and diplomacy.



Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un at their summit in Hanoi in Feb. 2019 | Image: Rodong Sinmun

## **REGRETS ON ENGAGEMENT**

For a brief while in 2018 to 2019, it seemed like a new era of peace on the Korean Peninsula was within reach. Moon Chung-in had a front-row seat to the historic summits between Moon Jae-in, Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump, first at Panmunjom and later in the North.

“I really felt a sense of peace at the time,” he recalled. “For me, the current developments are really devastating to my expectations.”

Moon reserved his strongest criticism for the Trump administration, which he believes derailed the emerging detente in 2019.

“Trump kicked it away (in Hanoi) by proposing a big deal and returning to the U.S. with no deal,” he said. “He should have taken some deal from North Korea.”

In Moon’s view, building trust through incremental progress, however small, was crucial.

But he doesn’t just fault Trump.

The Moon Jae-in government also did not do enough to follow through on initiatives like restarting the Kaesong Industrial Complex or Mount Kumgang tourism, he said, even when they didn’t run afoul of U.N. sanctions.

“He didn’t do anything,” Moon said of the former president. “He didn’t want to offend the Trump administration,” to ensure Seoul could maintain “close cooperation with the U.S.”

In hindsight, Moon sees that deferential approach to Washington as a major blunder.

“That is not the way you deal with the U.S.,” he said. “Our government has its own agenda” that it should push for even if that leads to some conflict with Washington.

“We put everything in the American basket,” he said. “In that way, we eventually lost North Korea completely.”



South Korean President Moon Jae-in receives a Joseon Dynasty-era sword as a gift from Russian leader Vladimir Putin | Image: Official Blue House Twitter

## **AN ENDANGERED SPECIES**

Moon Chung-in indicated that his pessimism about the state of inter-Korean relations extends to South Korean domestic politics.

Following Kim Jong Un’s renunciation of reunification and the Yoon administration’s shunning of dialogue, he said progressives and advocates for engagement in the ROK have become increasingly marginalized.

“It’s just really devastating and suffocating,” Moon said. “We have so-called scholars and intellectuals who support peace and engagement. At the same time, we have NGOs who have been trying to develop ties with North Korea.”

He painted a picture of a once-vibrant civil society movement falling into disarray and irrelevance, stating few people now join events on unification.

“Therefore, an entire so-called group supporting peace engagement are likely to become endangered species.”

This new reality leaves South Korean progressives in a double bind, caught between an uninterested public at home and an increasingly hostile partner in the North, Moon assessed.

Yet the former special adviser views the current moment as a test of the progressive movement's resilience and staying power.

"Cynicism is the worst enemy in any peaceful resolution of the Korean problem," he said.



Trump, Moon and Kim at Panmunjom in 2019 | Image: Trump White House Archived (June 30, 2019)

## **ANGER AND REGRET**

Amid worsening inter-Korean ties, Moon confessed his anger at the leaders who, in his view, squandered the historic opportunities of 2018-2019 — Donald Trump, Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong Un.

Nevertheless, he said he doesn't see the point in seeking someone to blame.

"You can blame Trump. You can blame conservatives in South Korea. You can blame Kim Jong Un," he allowed. "But the blame game will not lead to any solutions."

Moon said he holds out hope that a future U.S. administration, perhaps even a second Trump term, could revive the dormant diplomatic process with North Korea. Alternatively, he suggested ROK diplomacy with Russia could bear fruit for inter-Korean ties.

But he acknowledged that hopes are growing fainter by the day.

“The situation is so bad. It’s really bottom. It hit the bottom,” Moon said wearily. “I don’t see any way to reverse the current trend.”

*Edited by Bryan Betts*