

INTERVIEW Denuclearization can no longer be on agenda for US-NK talks: foreign policy expert

By **Bahk Eun-ji**

• Published Aug 20, 2026 2:53 pm KST Updated Aug 20, 2026 3:18 pm KST

Ex-national security special adviser says arms control could offer realistic starting point for renewed dialogue



U.S. President Donald Trump meets with crypto and prediction market executives at the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington, D.C., Wednesday (local time). EPA-Yonhap

As signs emerge that the United States and North Korea may be inching toward renewed engagement, the question of where denuclearization fits into future talks is coming back into focus.

U.S. President Donald Trump's reluctance to say whether denuclearization remains the goal of renewed talks with North Korea could open the door to a different approach focused first on arms control and reductions, a veteran foreign policy expert said.

“Denuclearization can no longer be on the agenda,” Moon Chung-in, a James Laney distinguished professor at Yonsei University, told The Korea Times in a written interview. “The DPRK will reject any call for dialogues and negotiations for denuclearization,” he added, referring to North Korea's formal name, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.



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, Feb. 4. Korea Times photo by Choi Won-suk

Moon said conventional and nuclear arms control and reductions would therefore be most likely to be on the agenda for renewed talks.

His remarks came as Trump sidestepped the question of denuclearization while intensifying his push to revive diplomacy with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

Asked on Wednesday (local time) whether denuclearization remains the goal of reengaging with Kim, Trump told reporters, “I don’t want to talk about that,” before stressing his good relationship with the North Korean leader. Trump also said he expects to meet Kim later this year.

Trump also said North Korea possesses 57 “very powerful nuclear weapons.” He also defended his decision to scale back the ongoing South Korea-U.S. military exercise, which he criticized as sending a “totally inappropriate and hostile” message to Pyongyang.

Moon, however, said not talking about denuclearization at the beginning of potential renewed talks does not mean abandoning denuclearization as a long-term goal.

“Balancing nuclear arms control talks with preserving the mandate of denuclearization will be tough,” Moon said, noting that governments in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo would face difficulties persuading their domestic audiences of such an approach.

Rather than seeking denuclearization at the outset, Moon suggested a phased approach that would first halt North Korea's nuclear and missile activities, then reduce its nuclear and missile arsenal and ultimately seek their elimination.

"As President Lee Jae Myung has suggested, the suspension of nuclear and missile activities, reduction of nuclear and missile arsenal, and their elimination in the long run must be the logical sequence," Moon said. "I believe President Trump should have the same sequence in mind."

Pyongyang, however, would expect substantial concessions in return, including an end to what it regards as hostile U.S. policy, diplomatic normalization, conventional and nuclear arms control talks, sanctions relief, recognition of its right to the peaceful use of atomic energy and an influx of foreign investment.

"Matching the two demanding wish lists will be a daunting challenge," Moon said.

On the possibility of another summit between Trump and Kim, Moon said progress will more likely take months than weeks, pointing to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in China in November as the "most ideal timing."

But he cautioned that extensive groundwork would be needed, including the creation of a task force, exchanges of personal letters and special envoys, and a clear list of what each side is prepared to receive and offer in return.

"Chairman Kim will not return to the summit with President Trump for a simple diplomatic show-up," Moon said. "This time, he will want to get some substantive gains that can impress his own people at home. Kim will try to avoid the Hanoi failure."

Moon also dismissed concerns that renewed direct diplomacy between Washington and Pyongyang would leave Seoul on the sidelines.

He pointed to a division of labor Lee proposed to Trump last year, under which Trump would serve as the "peacemaker" while Lee would act as the "pacemaker."

"The most ideal is that Seoul and Washington should prepare a joint road map on 'gives and takes' with North Korea through close consultations," Moon said, adding that Seoul should also prepare for possible negative fallout if U.S.-led negotiations run into difficulties.

Moon also viewed the scaling back of the Ulchi Freedom Shield exercise as a "proactive confidence-building measure" by Seoul and Washington.

He said the move did not necessarily require immediate reciprocity from Pyongyang, but he believes North Korea will respond by reducing the frequency of its ballistic missile tests.

“But if he [Trump] fails to revive the summit diplomacy with Chairman Kim, while undermining the ROK-U.S. alliance through the partial cancellation of the planned joint military exercise, it will be bad news for Koreans, with very negative security implications,” he said.



Bahk Eun-ji

Bahk Eun-ji has been with The Korea Times since 2012, building a career across multiple desks. She began at the Business Desk, where she conducted in-depth interviews with key figures in Korea's corporate world. Later, she moved to the Politics & City Desk, focusing on education policy and social affairs. She later served as team leader of the digital content team, leading curation efforts on the newspaper's homepage and reshaping print stories for social media audiences to enhance digital reach. Now back on the Politics Desk, she covers the National Assembly and the Ministry of National Defense, with a renewed focus on political developments.

ejb@koreatimes.co.kr