



Q&A

How to Get Kim Jong Un's Email

A South Korean presidential memoir reflects on tough diplomatic choices.

By **S. Nathan Park**, a Washington-based attorney and nonresident fellow of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.

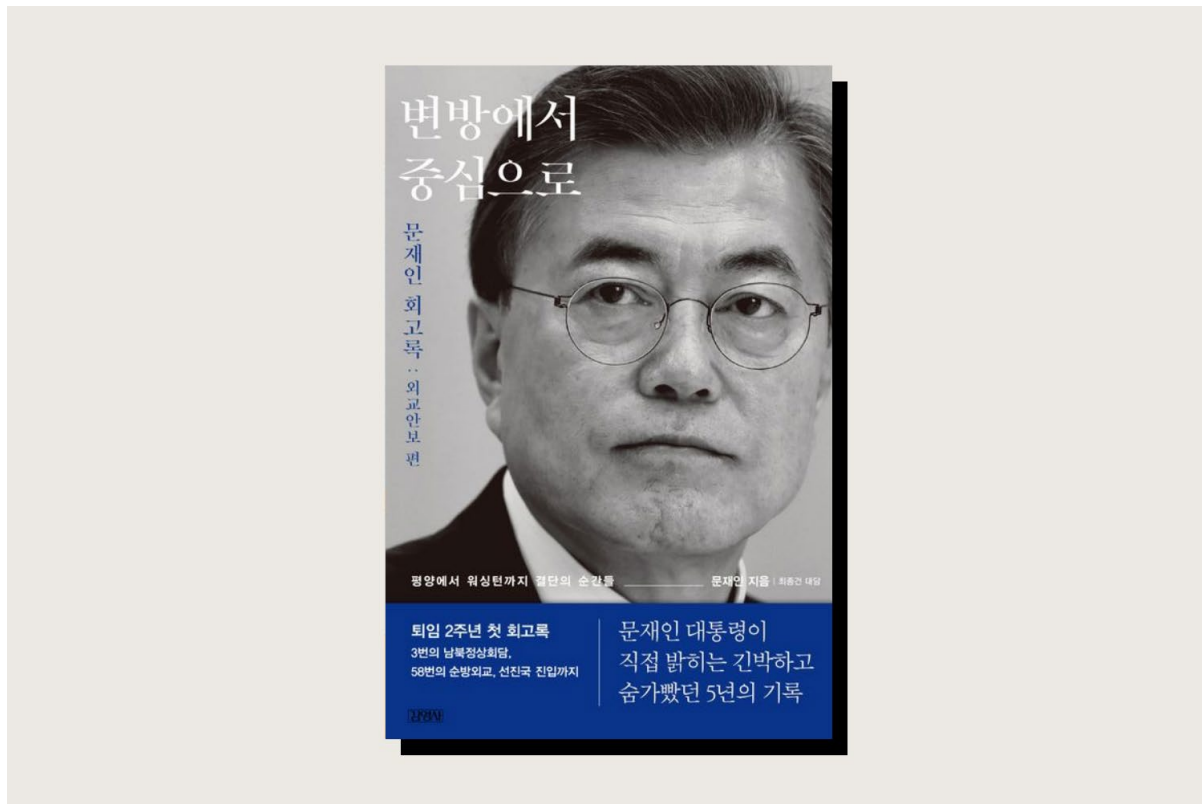


North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (left) and then-South Korean President Moon Jae-in cross the military demarcation line to the south side during the inter-Korean summit in Panmunjom, South Korea, on April 27, 2018. KOREA SUMMIT PRESS POOL/GETTY IMAGES

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Former South Korean President Moon Jae-in recently published *From the Periphery to the Center* in South Korea, a memoir that focuses exclusively on international affairs during his presidency from 2017 to 2022. The memoir is structured as a conversation with Choi Jong-kun, who served as a presidential secretary for peace and arms control, or chief presidential advisor for inter-Korean relations, and vice foreign minister under the Moon administration. I held my own conversation with Choi, now a professor at Yonsei University, to discuss the memoir—and the foreign-policy legacy of one of South Korea's most important leaders who tussled with the likes of former U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

S. Nathan Park: Let's start with the title. In what ways did South Korea go "from the periphery to the center"?



The book cover of *From the Periphery to the Center*, an autobiography of South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

Choi Jong-kun: The title was representative of what we did in the five years of Moon's presidency. When we took over, South Korea's democracy set a new global standard with the Candlelight Revolution [the peaceful protest movement that led to the impeachment and removal of Moon's predecessor, Park Geun-hye] when other Asian nations were having trouble with their democracy. Also, when we went through the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea showcased a new standard. Korea showcased a template where a nation could preserve freedom even while protecting public health and the economy.

Then there's our peace process. How we tried to deconstruct the hostile structure, how we tried to denuclearize a hostile neighbor. We worked very closely with the United States. Back then the United States began with a very hostile posture, and we were able to convince them to engage North Korea. All these are the ways in which South Korea went from the periphery to the center.

Park: Presidential memoirs can be a self-serving genre. What makes this book different?

Choi: We wanted to ask Moon a lot of uncomfortable questions: Why didn't you do that then? Do you have any regrets? We tried not to be self-justificatory. We wanted to give

the readers a look into the mindset of the very top leader, the president, and see how he perceived the situation back then versus now—even with disappointments.

When I returned to the university and tried to look at the raw materials recorded by South Korea's top decision-makers, either in English or in Korean, I found virtually zero. So I want this book to be always on the syllabus for undergraduates and graduates. That meant I really had to be strict about fact-checking, strict about questioning the president. The book has about 200 footnotes. When the president mentioned something about, say, the Hanoi summit or the Indo-Pacific Strategy, we cited books or materials that said something very different from our account. We wanted to bring in other perspectives and other materials in the footnotes so that the readers can decide for themselves.

Park: Much of the book is devoted to the North Korean denuclearization negotiations. What are some new revelations from the book?

Choi: There were a couple of things that I did not know until the president told me while we were doing this project. First of all, the fact that Kim Jong Un shared his email account—I was the presidential peace secretary, so the fact that I did not know, I was like, “Really? Wow, wow” to Moon in my conversation with him.

Kim Jong Un told Moon: “Mr. President, I am always on the road, on the train. Anything you send to me in a written form takes time to get to my desk in my train. So here is my email address. I have my laptop with me all the time. So if you sent me an email, I can always open up my laptop and check my email, and that's a lot faster.” A tech guy! That really surprised me.

The second thing I did not know was that we had a contact between North and South Korea right before Kim's 2018 New Year speech. A pretty high-level contact told us that Kim Jong Un would deliver a very positive speech. So, to my president, Kim's New Year speech was not such a big surprise, although it was to other people. This indicated that our approach to North Korea in the fall of 2017 turned out to be rather successful.

The third point is about Moon's perception of [former] President Donald Trump. Moon saw Trump rather positively. Moon liked the fact that Trump never mixed up issues. In other words, his approach to Kim Jong Un was never disturbed by our hard time over the USFK [U.S. Forces Korea] burden-sharing issue. And every time Trump had trouble regarding North Korea, within or without his cabinet, he always called up Moon. They discussed a lot of things, and he would pretty much listen to what my president said. So Moon's take on Trump is much more appreciative—rather different from the conventional view out there.

Park: Let's talk about Kim Jong Un. There is no question that Kim is a murderous dictator, but Moon had a functional relationship with Kim.

Choi: I never sensed that Moon 100 percent trusted Kim. I think Moon is disappointed at what has been happening between the two Koreas, and between North Korea and the United States. At one point, he said Kim Jong Un betrayed the Korean people—because

Kim lately stopped using the term “Korean people” [*minjok*, a term which harkens back to pre-division Korea] and began treating South Korea as a different and hostile country. Perhaps Moon wanted to send a message to Kim, remember our conversations from 2017 and 2018, how we worked very closely with each other, you should do that again.

Park: Stepping away from the memoir for a moment: In your view, is this a fundamental change? Have we crossed a bridge of no return when it comes to inter-Korean relations?

Choi: I don’t know, I left my office (laugh). But it depends on us, and it depends on the United States also. I think North Korea is very reactive—by that, I mean they spend all their time reacting to South Korea and the U.S. approach to Pyongyang. I think Kim Jong Un’s changed rhetoric came from his sense of betrayal from the Trump-Moon era, but he is also reacting to Yoon Suk-yeol [the current South Korean president, a conservative who has taken a hard-line approach to the North] and [U.S. President] Joe Biden.

Park: This book is also about how South Korean liberals conduct foreign policy, as opposed to South Korean conservatives. What differences does Moon see between a liberal administration in South Korea versus a conservative one?

Choi: “Liberal” is too broad of a term. In his memoir, Moon frequently criticized extreme leftists. He argues that South Korean liberals must be realistic in pursuing peace in the Korean Peninsula. That means working closely with the United States; that means respecting the United Nations sanctions regime.

This may surprise some people. But we believe that alliances are very important. We believe that North Korea cannot run away with its nuclear capabilities, and diplomacy and engagement are the only option. But diplomacy is meaningless without military power, and we believe deterrence is very important. We also want to work closely with Beijing, and we don’t want to piss off Russia. That is our realist environment.

Park: Moon uses some key words that are looked at with a lot of skepticism from D.C.—like “strategic ambivalence” or “equidistant diplomacy.” When D.C. think tanks see those words, they say the leftist administration in Seoul is drifting to China. What do you say to that?

Choi: (Laughs) Korea experts need to drop their biases. I see those keywords as South Korea diversifying its diplomatic frontiers. The fact that we work closely with China does not work against our relationship with Washington, D.C. Does a hostile relationship between Seoul and Beijing make things better for the United States? No. South Korea’s strategic value only increases when we engage Beijing.

The Cold War mentality needs to be dropped. South Korea is obviously a more important country now, so we have to diversify and widen our diplomatic frontier. And how would you influence North Korea without help or cooperation from China? Today, we have a pissed-off China backing up North Korea at the U.N. Russia, too. Is that good

for us? No. The D.C. think tanks need to be realistic about the challenges that South Korea faces.

Park: Another challenge is that Moon drew a lot of strength from democratic legitimacy and staking out the moral high ground. There are moments where this works well, when Moon spoke out against the military coup in Myanmar. But there are moments where Moon seems to bite his tongue, as with Kim Jong Un or as with Trump. An uncharitable view might be that Moon only stands up to an easy target.

Choi: South Korea earned democracy through two coups, many massacres, with protesters shedding blood on the streets. Anyone who doubts our commitment to democracy should learn South Korea's modern history. Why do we then try to work with Kim Jong Un? That's a wrong question to ask. If hatred becomes a factor in your diplomacy, you will not make rational decisions. South Korean presidents have a constitutional responsibility to protect the nation's safety and security and maximize its progress toward peaceful unification.

Park: The book came across very strongly when Moon criticized the conservatives' chickenhawk tendencies, how they wanted to be showy and tough but did a poor job in taking care of veterans and patriots. Moon spent a great deal of attention to make sure South Korea recognized independence fighters and making sure the government cared for their descendants.

Choi: Moon told me there are three pillars in national security: military, diplomacy, and veterans affairs. He is from a North Korean refugee family from the Korean War. At a DNA level, Moon appreciates that his family are survivors of the war. He is also very impressed with how Americans treated their veterans and how they remembered their wars. Moon believes deeply that the state carried unlimited responsibility in caring for those who sacrificed their lives.

I think that all comes down to why and how he came to believe that peace must come first. And Moon is a rare president who served in the military himself. That's why he believes that the military must be strong and the government must allocate an ample budget. And the president's first and foremost priority is to prevent a war from happening in the Korean Peninsula.

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