

Interview with Choi Jong-kun on 'Kim Eo-jun's News Factory

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▶Kim Eo-jun: We're joined by Choi Jong-kun, former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and a professor at Yonsei University. Hello.

▷Choi Jong-kun: Hello.

▶Kim Eo-jun: You just arrived at the airport from the U.S., right?

▷Choi Jong-kun: Yes—around 5:30 a.m. I can't help it.



▶Kim Eo-jun: You landed in Korea around 5:30 a.m. and came straight to our studio. I heard you went on an invited lecture trip with former President Moon—who invited him?

▷Choi Jong-kun: Two places. One is the Pacific Century Institute—people call it “PCI” for short. The other is the RAND Corporation. Both are in LA. PCI isn’t well known in Korea, but in our field it’s very well known. In short, it’s a network of Americans who have actually negotiated on, or had contact experience regarding, issues on the Korean Peninsula. Among the people Koreans may recognize are Ambassador Gallucci and Dr. Hecker...

▶Kim Eo-jun: Well-known people.

▷Choi Jong-kun: You can think of it as a kind of network institute of people like that. They translated and published the former President’s memoir, “From the Periphery to the Center,” in English. That led to the invitation. And while he was there, in collaboration with RAND—said to be the largest institute on the U.S. West Coast and one of the oldest major think tanks in the U.S.—he gave speeches over two days at each venue.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Being invited to places like that and going abroad to lecture in person—

▷Choi Jong-kun: After leaving office—

▶Kim Eo-jun: It's the first time, right?

▷Choi Jong-kun: It was his first trip abroad. To tell you for the first time—having just listened to this program—he received many invitations after leaving office, from Europe, neighboring countries, and the U.S. as well, but—

▶Kim Eo-jun: Why didn't he go?

▷Choi Jong-kun: That was during the Yoon Suk-yeol era. During the Yoon administration, we were in a kind of defensive mode—under all sorts of attacks. The Korean Peninsula peace process we pursued was disparaged, and people who played leading roles in it were subjected to various investigations—

▶Kim Eo-jun: Under investigation.

▷Choi Jong-kun: Yes—under investigation. In that situation, how could the former President go abroad and speak? Even personally, former President Moon was in a very difficult state of mind, and the sense was, “How could he go out and do anything?”

▶Kim Eo-jun: He himself and even his family were being investigated, and all of that was going on.

▷Choi Jong-kun: So the focus was on the book “From the Periphery to the Center.” Fortunately, it was translated into Japanese, and this time it was translated into English in the U.S., and so on. It seems to be going well.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Then, I guess he talked about his experience mediating between North Korea and the U.S. back then.

▷Choi Jong-kun: Yes. Basically, taking this speech as an opportunity—among the former presidents who are still living in Korea, President Moon is the only one who, under the Former Presidents' Courtesy Act, actually receives staff support or official courtesies. So as a former president, I think it also gave him a chance to consider what kind of other model he could create. When I looked at it carefully, he said about three things on this occasion. First, he asked that the U.S. show a bit more trust in—and support for—the Lee Jae-myung administration.

▶Kim Eo-jun: The U.S. government?

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김정은이 보인다
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지난 3월 6일, 랜드(RAND)연구소, 국제질서 및 남북 관계에 관한 좌담회



“ 한반도 평화의 시대를 열기 위해 최대한 인내하며 노력하고 있는 이재명 정부를 신뢰하고 성원해 주기 바란다 ”

문재인
전 대통령

▷Choi Jong-kun: Yes—he said he hoped they would offer their support. Second, he shared some personal reflections on the “Hanoi no-deal.”

▶Kim Eo-jun: The Hanoi no-deal.

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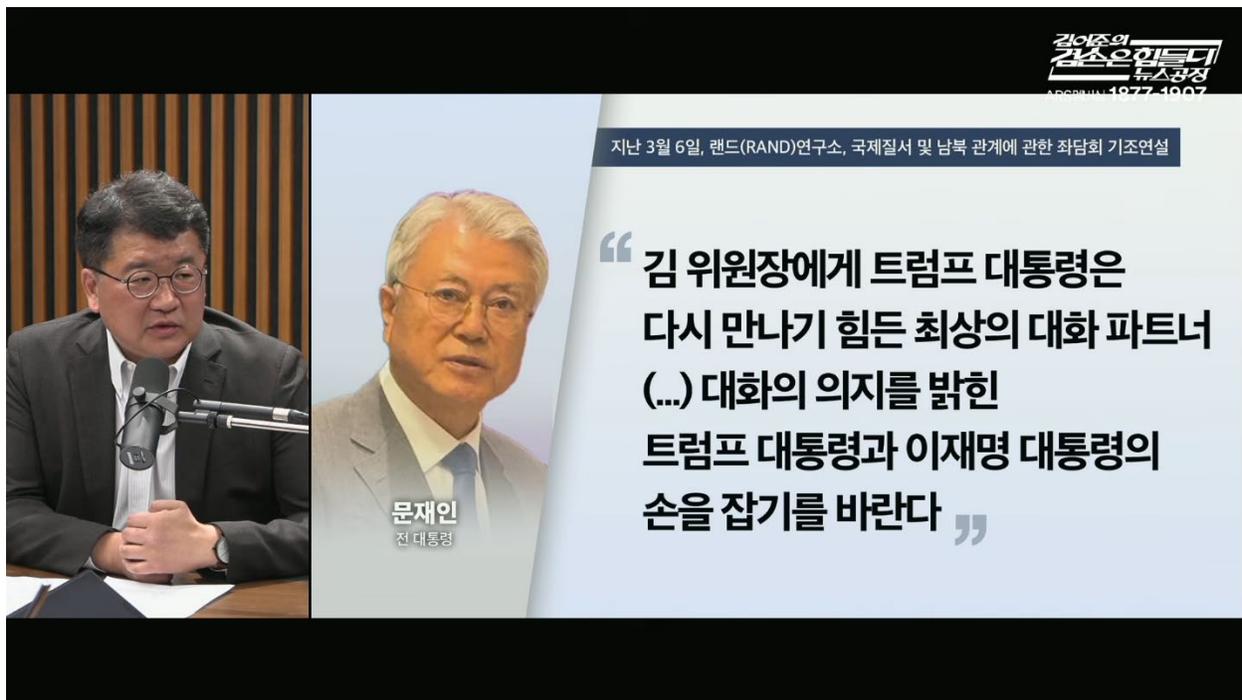



“ 결실을 맺지 못한 것이 뼈아픈 아쉬움으로 남았지만, 결코 헛된 것이 아니다 (...) 평화는 단번에 완성되는 성벽이 아니라, 끊임없이 물길을 내며 나아가는 강물 ”

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▷Choi Jong-kun: Third, he spoke about why a peace policy is necessary. And in conclusion, he made an appeal for Chairman Kim Jong-un and President Trump to

make a bold decision. According to media reports, there will be a U.S.–China summit in April, and he urged them to use that moment to make a big decision and usher in a turning point for the times. But with the Iran war breaking out lately, the “volume,” so to speak, has been turned up. In the speech, he said that America’s moral authority—its leadership of the world—is being challenged. And he expressed hope that the United States would once again demonstrate leadership that brings people together through solidarity and cooperation.



▶ Kim Eo-jun: President Moon is a very restrained man, so he put it that way. It’s not that moral authority is being threatened—it’s already collapsed. (Laughter)

▷ Choi Jong-kun: He had no choice but to speak very diplomatically. And he mentioned the Iran situation directly. He said the use of force can never be a fundamental solution; we must escape the vicious cycle of hatred and retaliation. The international community should restrain the use of force and pool its strength for a peaceful resolution through dialogue and diplomacy. When he said things like that—at PCI, during the dinner speech—there were about 400 Americans present. And at a certain point it suddenly became quiet, and they gave him a standing ovation. So I thought to myself, “Why are they reacting like this?” And what’s more, he delivered the speech in Korean first, and then in English. That can break the rhythm a bit, but I think they were hearing the language of a statesman—a leader—in English for the first time in a while.



▶ Kim Eo-jun: Even a standing ovation?

▷ Choi Jong-kun: It happened about six times. There were one or two standing ovations. Even though it was sequential like that—

▶ Kim Eo-jun: Those people have been watching nothing but Trump—and listening to nothing but Trump’s language. But there used to be presidents who spoke like that, too. And since there’s no one saying the things a president ought to say, they hear it and applaud—and I even heard there were people who cried. Is that true?

▷ Choi Jong-kun: I was seated at the head table, and over this way—without naming names—there were former U.S. ambassadors to Korea, and people who had actually negotiated with North Korea. Behind us there were also people like a former CIA director and others. One person’s face turned red and blotchy, and his eyes welled up—bloodshot, like he might cry. I think a lot of emotions came up for them.

▶ Kim Eo-jun: I can imagine. In the Trump era—if it weren’t Trump, it might be different, but in the Trump era, from the Americans’ point of view, the Korean president came and said the things their own president should be saying. And for those who had experience with U.S.–North Korea contacts—

▷ Choi Jong-kun: And for former President Moon as well, since it was his first trip to the U.S.—his first trip abroad after leaving office—he was understandably tense, and jet lag was a factor. He put a lot of effort into the speeches, of course, but there was something I had forgotten, and it made me reflect. At RAND, he gave a special lecture to about 200

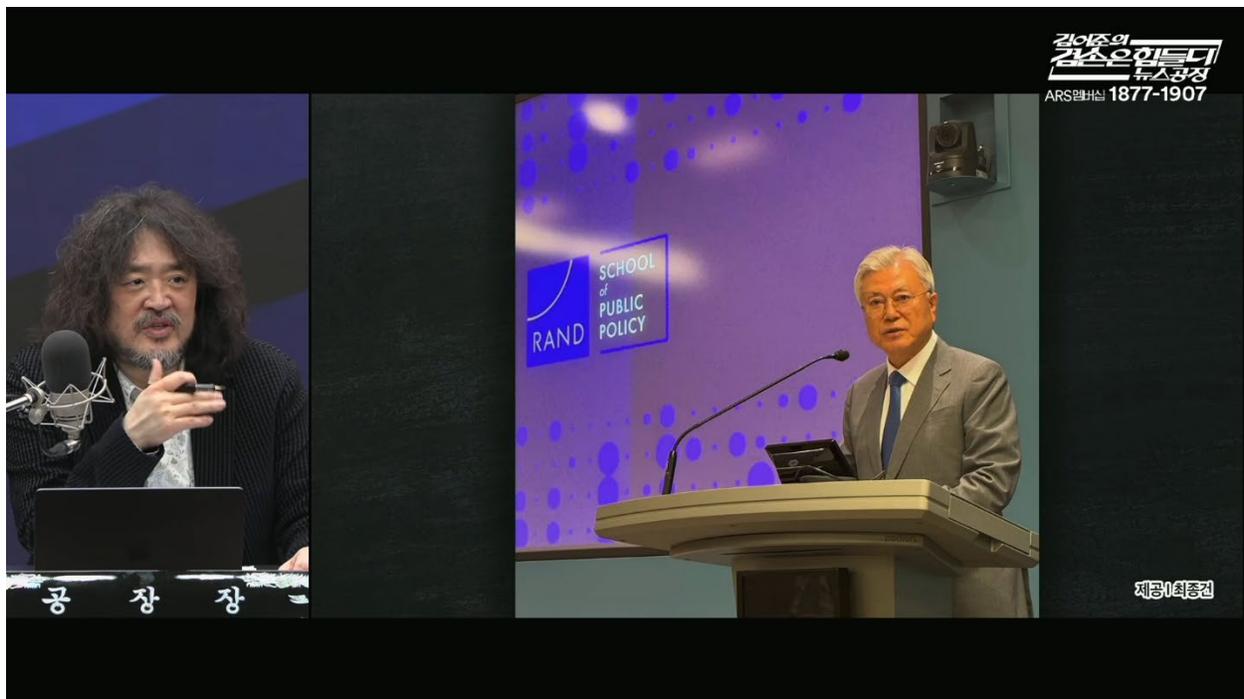
people—RAND public policy graduate students and experts. I assumed he would mainly talk about the Korean Peninsula peace process, but what he chose to speak about first was this: during his term, he said Korea did exceptionally well with COVID-19 prevention and crisis response. I had already forgotten that, and I felt I should reflect on it. Even as a staff member, I thought, we should have recorded and preserved those kinds of things more. It feels like we forget too many things.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Bloomberg ranked global pandemic responses after COVID, and put Korea in first place—and that was the end of it.

▷Choi Jong-kun: And that's because RAND traditionally studied defense and nuclear issues, but as the times changed, they also began researching public health and climate change.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Right.

▷Choi Jong-kun: So from their perspective, I think Korea looked like it was doing quite well.



▶Kim Eo-jun: As for the Iran situation—on inter-Korean issues, we can more or less guess what he would have said. But I'm thinking: for the Americans, it must have felt new to hear, from the Korean president, what they don't hear from their own president. So what did he say about the Iran war?

▷Choi Jong-kun: Regarding the Iran war, he spoke with peace as the central theme and wove Iran in briefly. While bringing up that issue, he essentially said: "This is not the

America we thought we knew.” He said the America he learned about in textbooks feels different from what he sees now. He noted that America once tried to protect democracy and uphold institutions, but now seems to put military force too far out front. He also said that when camp-based logic and hatred take the lead, even what is called ‘peace through strength’ only amplifies hatred and enmity—so peace will not come. In that context, he argued the Iran situation is a very important turning point. Even then, I was on the team working simultaneously in Korean and English, so the delivery inevitably slows by a beat because it’s sequential—but the Americans applauded.

▶Kim Eo-jun: At that point.

▷Choi Jong-kun: That’s right.

▶Kim Eo-jun: So they heard from President Moon the words they want to hear from their own president. Since you’re here—and you’re a foreign policy expert—I’m curious: how do you think this Iran war will develop, considering the situation in the U.S. and Trump’s approach?

▷Choi Jong-kun: Yes. I think this is different from the wars we thought we knew. In a conventional war, you’d typically see air power first, then missiles and shows of force, and eventually a ground war—that’s when it truly becomes a war.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Right. That’s how it usually concludes.

▷Choi Jong-kun: I think, over the medium to long term, we may see intermittent missile launches, intermittent maritime blockades, and in Washington, messages full of Trump’s characteristic, inconsistent saber-rattling. So I think that scenario looks the most likely.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Ah—so it’s not that the war is over, but it’s also not exactly an ongoing full-scale war either.

▷Choi Jong-kun: Another scenario is that they use force one more time—like Trump says, they send a strong wave, conduct one more heavy bombing, and then Trump declares on his own that the war is over. Who knows.

▶Kim Eo-jun: He just declares victory. Just like that.

▷Choi Jong-kun: I don’t think Iran would accept that. Actually, although I traveled to the U.S. this time accompanying the former President, I can’t obtain the U.S. electronic travel authorization. Because I’ve been to Iran and North Korea. I’ve been to Iran three times.

▶Kim Eo-jun: So the electronic authorization doesn’t work?

▷Choi Jong-kun: Right. Because I’ve traveled to countries the U.S. designates as adversaries.

▶Kim Eo-jun: So you always have to do a separate interview.



▷Choi Jong-kun: So—I’m absolutely not an Iran expert, and certainly not a Middle East expert. But the Iran I know is a country that becomes more unified the harder it gets hit.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Of course.

▷Choi Jong-kun: And it’s a typical dictatorship in the sense we understand—but with religion intertwined.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Right. It’s a theocracy.

▷Choi Jong-kun: We often talk about the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), but when they complete their service, they spread out into different regions—entering local religious sectors and politics, and eventually taking control of parliament.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Those people are crusaders—at least, that’s how they see themselves.

▷Choi Jong-kun: And because it’s the United States—and because it’s Trump—and because it’s being closely coordinated with Israel, I think it will be very difficult to handle recklessly or easily.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Trump can declare, “It’s over.” But for Iran to stop, Iran also needs to be able to declare, “We won,” too.

▷Choi Jong-kun: From Iran’s perspective, they were negotiating the nuclear deal for the third time, with Oman acting as an intermediary, and things were said to be going well—

but then they were blindsided. That's not good. Iran's negotiating teams have a strong tradition. They're the team that produced the nuclear agreement with the U.S., known as the JCPOA. And as the administration changed, those people came back in. Some of them were also teams that negotiated with Korea. But this time they've been greatly weakened.

▶ Kim Eo-jun: Of course. Naturally.

▷ Choi Jong-kun: The hardliners—the IRGC, the theocratic forces—have probably taken control. That's why there's been hereditary succession, and the successor is said to be even more hardline.

▶ Kim Eo-jun: Ah—back then the permanent members of the UN Security Council were all essentially there, and they concluded that deal. And then Trump unilaterally tore it up—something from ten years ago. They tried to do it again, but failed this time too, so now they probably have no standing left.

▷ Choi Jong-kun: Yes. And although I went to the U.S. this time accompanying former President Moon, I also went to Washington once or twice last month. And I came away more disappointed—thinking, “This America is different from the America I thought I knew.” This isn't about whether I agree or disagree; even they don't really know what's going on inside the Trump administration. Even people who call themselves U.S. experts in Washington don't know how their own government is operating. Normally, the policy ecosystem is a kind of trinity: inputs from agencies like State, Defense, Energy, and Commerce; a consulting mechanism where experts propose what should be done; and the White House making political judgments. That's how it usually works.

▶ Kim Eo-jun: In Korea we call that party–government–presidential office consultations.

▷ Choi Jong-kun: But right now, the agencies don't know what's happening. They spend all day watching Trump's messages. So their usual traditions are broken. Sometimes that has harmed us, sometimes helped us—but the point is, they don't know. And the Iran issue is separated from broader Middle East issues, so it's being driven by a small number of people—almost like the North Korea nuclear issue. If there were real Iran specialists, they wouldn't be advising things this way, given Iran's particularities. And while negotiations were underway—this makes the Korean Peninsula issue even more important.

▶ Kim Eo-jun: That was actually going to be my last question. Watching Iran, you start wondering: will North Korea come to the table? Or the other way around—last time, in the first term, they got blindsided at the end, but now they're negotiating with one side while preparing for war with the other. How could they come to negotiations like this—

▷Choi Jong-kun: Exactly. This isn't a normative "should" question. The more times like this, the more important the role of the South Korean government becomes. But right now it's unfortunate. With the world going the way it is, inter-Korean relations have completely—

▶Kim Eo-jun: Collapsed.

▷Choi Jong-kun: Yes, it's collapsed. On this point, former President Moon also received many questions. With the Iran issue unfolding like this, what will happen with Kim Jong-un? President Moon viewed it in two extremes: either the likelihood of coming out to talks increases, or the likelihood of not coming out increases—there's no middle.

▶Kim Eo-jun: None at all—no middle ground. That seems right.

▷Choi Jong-kun: So in my view, our government's room to maneuver is quite narrow.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Extremely narrow.

▷Choi Jong-kun: Still, there are a few things we can do. For example, we should keep going to Washington frequently, and speak candidly in settings that are not public. A pacemaker has to run faster or go farther than the actual runner. And we need to press China more. From Kim Jong-un's perspective, whether he comes out via China, or whether he tries to bring Trump to Panmunjom or Pyongyang, there needs to be something concrete beforehand. Just meeting like before won't be enough.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Keep at it.

▷Choi Jong-kun: Yes—speaking candidly. Because a pacemaker has to run faster or go farther than the actual runner. And we need to press China more. From Kim Jong-un's perspective, whether he comes out via China, or whether he tries to bring Trump to Panmunjom or Pyongyang, there needs to be something concrete beforehand. Just meeting like before won't be enough.

▶Kim Eo-jun: It won't.

▷Choi Jong-kun: What I felt, triggered by former President Moon's trip to the U.S., is that we really need to work hard in the realm of what's called public diplomacy. There are very few people talking about the importance of peace and the importance of negotiation. Everyone has become demoralized—because there's no "feeding" from the U.S. government, no information. Our government, too, seems to be trying to figure out what's going on. During this trip, we had many conversations with people who experienced the Korean Peninsula peace process and with Americans who actually negotiated with North Korea. Of course the former President's speech matters, but this time we may also need a major shock—however closely we plan. A war in Iran is truly bad: for oil prices, for energy—bad for Iranians, and economically costly for Americans.

In times like this, the first priority on the Korean Peninsula must be preventing conflict. The second is more proactive cooperation among neighboring countries. That includes strategic cooperation with China—namely, how to handle the North Korea issue.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Even if Trump doesn't, he's going to China at the end of this month. Whether it's the Iran war or relations with North Korea, it feels like that could become an inflection point.

▷Choi Jong-kun: But from China's perspective, why would they move?

▶Kim Eo-jun: Right.

▷Choi Jong-kun: If we want China to help, they need incentives—or at least a stage where they can save face. Who can create that? There's really no choice but for the South Korean government to do it.

▶Kim Eo-jun: That's a very difficult thing to do right now. But—

▷Choi Jong-kun: That's why, on this occasion, I think former President Moon's visit to California is very important for shaping our public-policy discourse. I've returned to the university, but it was important for me as well.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Trump won't be around forever. But we have to live next to North Korea forever, so we can't just neglect this problem.

▷Choi Jong-kun: I'm also afraid of a kind of path dependence. When I talk with U.S. senators—especially Democrats—they say that even if someone like Bernie Sanders were to take power, America can't go back to the way it was.

▶Kim Eo-jun: People say that a lot.

▷Choi Jong-kun: Tariffs—and their stance toward various international organizations—because there's American public opinion. Americans' favorability toward President Trump's State of the Union address is quite high. CNN measured it.

▶Kim Eo-jun: So it's like this: even if Democrats come back to power and try to pull things back from the far right that Trump pushed them to, the U.S. still won't return to where it used to be.

▷Choi Jong-kun: Exactly. A changed America, a changed regional situation, and collapsed inter-Korean relations—especially that collapse—are crucial. We're still caught in the trap left by the Yoon Suk-yeol administration. That's painful. That's why, even during this California visit, I felt we can't focus only on Washington. Many key actors who care about economic interests and alliance relations are also in the West Belt and the Midwest. So it's important to keep talking with them and creating events. Of course a former president matters, but I also felt that our expert community needs this

kind of awakening, too. I talked a lot with President Moon during the trip, and it felt new. The perspective of people who have negotiated—and people who have dealt with North Korea—differs from the perspective you often see in ordinary commentary. In any case, an uneasy peace is better than war.

▶ Kim Eo-jun: Right.

▷ Choi Jong-kun: And the question is how we turn an uneasy peace into a sustainable peace. Within sustainable peace, a fair peace is important. Peace can't benefit only South Korea. It has to benefit North Korea, too—

▶ Kim Eo-jun: Maybe this is the moment to create an international forum with the people you met in the U.S.—a civilian forum, in the Trump era—

▷ Choi Jong-kun: That would be great—if various government ministries could help. Anyway, that's where we are for now.

▶ Kim Eo-jun: What is this photo? Please put it up just once.



▷ Choi Jong-kun: This photo was taken at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, which former President Moon visited on this trip.

▶ Kim Eo-jun: Ah—that's a photo of Nancy.

▷ Choi Jong-kun: For us, we're very grateful for this. They showed a great deal of courtesy. This is Reagan's post-presidency office. It's inside the library, but it isn't normally open to the public. They allowed us to share it, and we saw it in detail. The

former President also looked at it very closely. From our perspective, we were also interested in how U.S. presidential libraries are run—though we're running a bookstore now.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Well, he's a retired president. (Laughter)

▷Choi Jong-kun: But again, it's in the library and not something that's normally made public. They allowed us to share it, and we were able to see it. The former President looked at it very carefully. And from our side, we're interested in how these presidential libraries operate—though right now we're running a bookstore.

▶Kim Eo-jun: Running a bookstore. (Laughter)

▷Choi Jong-kun: A bookstore and a library are very different, aren't they?

▶Kim Eo-jun: A former president running a bookstore is probably unique in the world.

▷Choi Jong-kun: Yes. And that has meaning too. The former President looked very closely. Reagan was a Republican, but it felt poignant to see a country commemorate a former president's time in office and post-presidency activities in a bipartisan way.

▶Kim Eo-jun: But after Trump, that will probably end. That too.

▷Choi Jong-kun: Well, we'll have to endure and get through it.

▶Kim Eo-jun: All right—we'll stop here for today. And about that civilian inter-Korean forum—bringing together U.S. experts and Korean experts, like you mentioned—

▷Choi Jong-kun: Yes, we've been doing it continuously—though it doesn't always go smoothly—

▶Kim Eo-jun: I'll introduce you. I will.

▷Choi Jong-kun: Okay.

▶Kim Eo-jun: It seems like not many others are very interested, so I'll introduce it. We'll leave it there for today. That was Professor Choi Jong-kun.

▷Choi Jong-kun: Yes, thank you.