

## EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

# North Korea can change but won't fall

South Korean presidential adviser Moon Chung-in tells Asia Times pragmatism is the priority in engaging North Korea

By **ANDREW SALMON**

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North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is shown reading a personal letter from US President Donald Trump. Photo: AFP/KCNA Via KNS

*This is the third installment of a three-part interview series. Read parts [one](#) and [two](#).*

SEOUL – North Korea has been quiet for over a year.

After the failure of the 2019 Hanoi summit between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump, Pyongyang has continued its arms development and conducted multiple short- and mid-range weapons tests.

However, it has not carried out the kind of major actions – namely a satellite launch, an intercontinental ballistic missile test, or a nuclear detonation – that would provoke the international community.

This may be put down to prudence. Last year was a US presidential election year; this year, the new Biden administration is in the midst of foreign policy reviews, a process which may take months. Moreover, North Korea country faces multiple internal problems and may not wish to court additional, external pressures.

“North Korea now faces three major challenges – Covid-19, natural disasters and economic sanctions,” said Moon Chung-in, who has advised all three of the South Korean administrations which have engaged North Korea, in an exclusive interview.

Yet there is no sign of instability. “Despite ongoing hardships, I do not see any signs of immediate economic collapse in the North – prices of rice, oil, and other necessary goods seem relatively stable, and I do not see any panic buying and hoarding,” Moon said.

Like many others, including persons who have run business in North Korea, Moon admits to being mystified by the resilience of the economy: “It is a kind of puzzle to me.”

What is clear is the country’s self-reliance mantra.

“I don’t know to what extent it can overcome these challenges via that strategy,” Moon said. “But their position is very clear: ‘Nobody is going to help us, we have to find our way to survive and get prospering.’”

In Moon's opinion, 2020 was likely North Korea's worst year since 1994 – the year state founder Kim Il Sung died, and a combination of the fall of European Communism and natural disasters led to a series of murderous famines.

And yet, in 2021, “Kim Jong Un is still well and alive,” Moon said. “North Korea has survived 2020.”



Rumors had run rife about leader Kim Jong Un's health in 2020. Photo: Facebook

### **'The stronger the pressure, the stronger the resistance'**

The silence from North Korea may be welcomed by the Biden White House, for it faces a far bigger foreign policy challenge than North Korea in China.

Moon considers the nationalistic grandstanding and global assertiveness of Chinese President Xi Jinping to be – at least in part – a response to US pressure.

“When there were no clear and pressing outside threats, Chinese leaders such as Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao took a moderate posture,”

Moon said. “When the US started to pressure China, Xi ‘s power became stronger and stronger.”

Given this posture, “What other choice does China have but to strengthen its political leadership?” he asked.

Central to Chinese political thinking is historical remembrance of twinned evils that manifested in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: foreign oppression and national disunity.

The bloody foreign humiliations of the Opium Wars, the Boxer Rebellion, the Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War were buttressed by internal divisions – the devastation of the Taiping Rebellion (history’s bloodiest civil war) the decontrol of the Warlord Period and the divided Nationalist/Communist resistance to Imperial Japan.

Addressing this “collective gestalt of China,” Moon noted: “Weak leadership can lead to a break up: This is the lesson China learned from 150 years of humiliations. When I talk with the Chinese elite in Beijing, their position is very clear: ‘The stronger the outside pressure, the stronger the resistance.’”

The same logic, Moon asserts, also applies to North Korea. This pressure-push back dynamic is one that Biden must confront.

“More pressure from the US will further enhance internal support of President Xi by triggering nationalism,” Moon said. “The paradox is that the US might be helping Xi to add power.”

In the troubled wake of the Trump administration, Moon identifies four key areas of conflict between China and the US: (1) geopolitics; (2) geo-economic decoupling; (3) technological nationalism; (4) values and ideology.

On the second and third issues, Moon believes, tensions may be dialed down as Biden goes multilateral and leverages bodies like the World Trade

Organization (WTO). But on geopolitics and values, confrontation will not abate, Moon says.

“On geo-economics and techno-nationalism, I think Biden will seek competition, while minimizing unfair trade practices and blocking industrial espionage,” Moon said. “But he will take almost the same stance as Trump in the areas of geopolitical containment and values” – though unlike Trump, he will likely build “a coalition of democracies.”

Even so, there exist areas where the rivals have common ground, adding further complexity to the matrix.

“The Biden administration will seek cooperation with China on climate change, the pandemic and the North Korean nuclear issue,” Moon said. “Thus, there will be a confluence of cooperation, competition and confrontation.”

Yet Moon warns against something that some would suggest already exists: A new Cold War. “That will not help anyone,” he said. “It involves a negative-sum game – South Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia would all suffer collateral damage.”

Moon suggests that economic priorities should balance strategic alliances.

“It’s not a matter of taking sides – that’s a passive way of thinking,” he said. “US allies can move to prevent a new Cold War as their economies are dependent on China.”



US aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan (left), amphibious assault ship USS Boxer and associated ships conducting operations on October 6, 2019, in the South China Sea. Photo: AFP/US Navy/Erwin Jacob

## Moon in the middle

All this presents agonizing diplomatic headaches for South Korea. Its leading trade partner is China but it leans heavily on its only strategic ally, the US, for security. And three factors within South Korea's citizenry present further complications for regional relationships.

Firstly, South Korea won their own democracy well within living memory, so look askance at Beijing's actions in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and elsewhere. But they are also aware that their nation has handled Covid-19 far better than the US, a country whose chaotic socio-political trajectory of late has taken the shine off its former role model status.

Thirdly, there is little public appetite for an alliance with neighbor Japan which – while it shares most of Korea's big-picture challenges, in addition to similar lifestyles and value systems – is despised for its colonial rule from 1910-1945 and its perceived unwillingness to atone for past misdeeds.

With all that, Moon preaches independent policymaking with an eye on the alliance.

“We are an independent sovereign state and we have our own national interests. When there is a clash of interest between Washington and Seoul we can say ‘no,’” he said. “But we are indebted to the US: The US saved us from North Korean invasion and our economic miracle was partly because of US support.”

Clashes of interest in recent years have included the stationing of a US missile defense system, THAAD, on Korean soil, triggering Chinese sanctions; a massive difference of opinion over the amount Seoul should pay to host US troops; and ongoing complexities before wartime operational control of local troops shifts from US to domestic command (“OPCON Transfer”).

There has also been some pressure from Washington on Seoul to tone down its anti-Tokyo actions. Moon suggests all issues can be adjusted through “mutual consultation.” So where does Moon’s namesake, President Moon Jae-in, stand?

Korea’s president, derided in some conservative circles on both sides of the Pacific as a hard-leftist or even a pro-North Korean, has cleaved to the US despite the pressures applied during the Trump administration.

This is visible in his maintenance of the bilateral alliance – despite the cost brouhaha – and in his refusing to breach sanctions on North Korea, despite his ardent wish to engage in cross-DMZ trade.

“I would say that Moon is a pro-American leader,” Moon said. “Preventing an outbreak of war is his number one priority and put very simply, maintaining a close alliance prevents war.”

Even so, there has been division among the president’s advisors.





Talks between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (R) and South Korean President Moon Jae-in have stalled. Photo: AFP/KCNA via KNS

“Some in the government have argued that we should enhance engagement with North Korea at the expense of the US alliance, but Moon has turned them down,” the academic said. “His major foreign policy has always been: ‘How can we promote cooperation with North Korea without necessarily undermining relations with the US?’”

South Korea, a mid-tier power among giants China, Japan, Russia and the US, faces realpolitik constraints on its freedom of maneuver. “No president can take excessive policy options,” Moon said.

These constraints explain the South Korean president’s lack of bold initiatives. “He has been pursuing a ‘mini-max’ strategy- minimal risk, maximum benefits,” Moon said. “I would argue for maximum benefits; he would argue for minimum risk.”

But risks continue to simmer.



Over the last decade, US troops in Korea have redeployed from their customary east-west axis south of the DMZ, to a new north-south axis in a series of sea-air-land bases along South Korea's Yellow Sea coastline. While these new hubs are a consolidation from their previous wide scatter of bases nationwide, the concentration makes them vulnerable.

“These US forces have a lot of overflight of China but it could be risky to maintain these bases in the event of a major crisis,” Moon said, citing both Chinese and North Korean missiles.

He fears US-based GIs' vulnerability in the wider strategic situation could force their departure. “I worry that heightened military tension between China and the US could undermine the status of American forces in South Korea,” he said.

The chances of upgraded Korean-Japan relations look slim: Few Koreans would countenance a partnership with the Japanese military, or a more expeditionary Japanese military, Moon said.

“South Korea cannot have an alliance with Japan because of its Peace Constitution,” he said. “If you have a military alliance with Japan, it will be tantamount to endorsing amendment of its Peace Constitution. And without the clearance of past historical issues, the South Korean people will not support it.”

With no sign of historical amity on the horizon, the task of any Biden-era diplomats seeking to bring Seoul and Tokyo to the table looks fraught, if not hopeless.



Camp Humphreys is a giant chunk of military America in western South Korea. Photo: USFK

## **Korean reunification hopes**

A still distant dream is reunification of the peninsula under South Korean – or at least democratic – auspices. The long-term benefits would be immense.

South Korea would gain road, rail and pipeline access to the Eurasian continent and 22 million new citizens. Its corporates would be rejuvenated by colossal new projects: The rebuilding of the North's national infrastructure, the ground-up development of its market, the exploitation of its natural resources.

And, most importantly, a huge security threat would suddenly evaporate. As someone who is pro-engagement, it may surprise some that Moon is not an aggressive promoter of reunification.

“Though it is our cherished goal, the process can be very painful, and it will be very difficult to achieve,” he said, arguing for gradualism rather than German-style collapse-absorption or Vietnam-style conquest.

Hence, although unification is a “national desire” and “normative commitment” the first goal must be to solidify peace, Moon says.

“We could live divided but peacefully,” he said. “We have not had a major war since 1953 despite heightened military tensions. We have been able to manage them.”

One major criticism of Moon and others who engage Kim Jong Un is their refusal to pressure North Korea on human rights.

It’s a real issue. North Korea is ruled by hereditary dictators supported by an empowered elite, whose privileges are buttressed by a harsh class system. Citizens enjoy no freedoms: of expression, of association, of mobility, or of religion.

They are heavily surveilled by state mechanisms and have no right to legal resource or due process. Hanging over them is fear of guilt by association, of state security police interrogation and a nationwide gulag of prisons camp that range from relatively benign “re-education” camps to hideous “total control” camps. For many, life ends with firing-squad execution.

But for Moon, the priority is pragmatism.

“Once you build trust with North Korea, you can raise human rights, but if you don’t have any trust you can’t raise it because the North will regard you as an enemy,” he said.

Moon recalls discussing the human rights issue with then-president Kim Dae-jung. Kim, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, had battled authoritarian regimes in South Korea and called for human rights enforcement in Myanmar and East Timor. However, he did not speak up against Pyongyang.

Kim offered Moon three reasons for his silence, Moon recalled.

First: Raising human rights could jeopardize inter-Korean relations. Second: A trade-off exists between rights and needs; insistence on the former could lead to the North refusing the latter such as South Korean food and fertilizer aid. Third: There are limits to external intervention in securing democracy and human rights.

“Economic development and the rise of the middle class created a social milieu conducive to democratic transition, driven in part by the white-collar classes who poured onto the streets and supported student protests,” Moon said, referring to the swirl of events that led to the democratization of South Korea in 1987.

“The role of the US was very limited,” he continued. “That means you can’t impose human rights and democracy from the outside – North Koreans themselves should strive for that.”

That process would be impossible, if not suicidal, under the current Kim regime. Hence, Moon argues that external threats should be lessened to defuse Pyongyang’s paranoia.

“We should help North Korea go through the process of opening and reform, as well as adopting a market system,” he said. “It is only after this process that a meaningful civil society would emerge in the North. And that is the most important prerequisite for political change.”



South Koreans at a lookout point in Cheorwon, just south of the DMZ, gaze into North Korea. Photo: Andrew Salmon/Asia Times

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