

This interview of PCI Board Member, Professor Chung-in Moon, appeared in *Vox* on Monday, September 23, 2019.

The optimistic case for a US-North Korea deal, explained by a top South Korean official

Moon Chung-in, a top adviser to South Korean President Moon Jae-in, says there's an over 70 percent chance of a US-North Korea deal by year's end.

By [Alex Ward@AlexWardVoxalex.ward@vox.com](mailto:AlexWard@Vox.com) Sep 23, 2019, 4:50pm EDT



In a photo taken on March 14, 2019, Moon Chung-in speaks with AFP at his office in Seoul. *Ed Jones/AFP/Getty Images*

A top adviser to South Korean President Moon Jae-in says there's more than a 70 percent chance the US and North Korea will strike an agreement either on nuclear weapons or their relationship by the year's end.

That's the main takeaway from my hour-long talk in Seoul last week with [Moon Chung-in](#), who is so trusted by the South Korean leader that he was named the next ambassador to the US this year. He [declined the offer](#), choosing instead to remain in his current post as a special aide on national security, foreign affairs, and unification.

We spoke in a hotel bar about [South Korea's displeasure with the Trump administration's handling of North Korea](#) and Kim Jong Un's fast-approaching, [end-of-year deadline](#) to sign an agreement with the US.

While many experts are skeptical this can happen, Moon says the longtime adversaries will probably make at least a small deal because both President Donald Trump and Kim want one.

“The two leaders are committed to making a deal, but the proposals of course must be mutually acceptable,” he told me over beers and coffee. “I would say now they are going through the adjustment period of fine tuning their agendas,” meaning both of their expectations are lowering in order to take at least a tiny step forward.

Moon told me he was speaking only on behalf of himself, not the government, but his thinking no doubt reflects some of the ideas at the highest levels in Seoul. It’s therefore possible President Moon Jae-in (no relation) may have shared that cheery outlook with Trump during their meeting at the UN on Monday.

Should a deal not materialize by December 31, though, even Moon Chung-in worries that the days of Trump threatening North Korea with “fire and fury” can come roaring back.

“If there’s no deal then [North Korea] may start testing long-range missiles again and possibly its seventh nuclear bomb,” he said. “Then we’re back to where we were two years ago: bloody noses and threats of war.”

Our conversation, edited for length and clarity, follows.

Alex Ward

During this most recent trip to South Korea I’ve noticed that the government seems particularly upset with how the Trump administration is handling North Korea, primarily because it’s hurting Seoul’s desire to get closer to Pyongyang. Is that a fair assessment on my part?

Moon Chung-in

The US made sure that South Korea would not get ahead of US-North Korea relations. We have complied with the assumption that the US would make the promised breakthrough.

But after February’s Hanoi summit — where Trump and Kim met for the second time — there was no progress in US-North Korea relations, so we couldn’t deliver on the military and political relationship-building promises we made to Pyongyang. Therefore, for the sake of improved US-South Korea relations, we in fact sacrificed North Korea-South Korea relations. In order to comply with what America wanted, we virtually stopped.

North Korea was really disappointed with South Korea. They basically say “A-ha, South Korea, you got nothing and are a puppet of the United States. Therefore, we’d better talk with the United States directly.” In April, even Chairman Kim Jong Un said that South Korea should not claim it is a “mediator” and shouldn’t use those kinds of words.

That is the situation. South Korean government officials got to be really frustrated, and in fact North Korea is now really angry.



President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at their second summit in Hanoi, Vietnam on February 28, 2019. *Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images*

Alex Ward

What is the South Korean government saying to the US, then? And is the Trump administration even listening?

Moon Chung-in

Yongbyon, arguably North Korea's most important nuclear facility that Pyongyang offered to dismantle in exchange for sanctions relief in Hanoi, is not really a small deal. It is a big deal, even though the US rejected that proposal.

If North Korea is willing to go for the complete, verifiable, and permanent dismantling of its nuclear facilities there, the US should offer corresponding measures such as a possible relaxation of sanctions. That may lead North Korea to reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mount Kungang Tourist Project, two important areas for growing inter-Korean relations.

But I'm not speaking for the government, okay?

Alex Ward

But you do advise President Moon and have an official title.

Moon Chung-in

Yes.

Alex Ward

So you think that it would be wise for President Moon to tell Trump to accept the Hanoi deal, essentially Yongbyon's verifiable dismantlement for sanctions relief?

Moon Chung-in

If South Korea were communicating with North Korea, we should be demanding several things.

First, invite international inspectors to the Punggye-ri nuclear test site. Second, urge North Korea to dismantle Tongchang-ri missile-engine test site and launching pad. Third, tell Pyongyang that in addition to the nuclear facility in Yongbyon, North Korea might have to come up with a "plus alpha" — meaning ending its high-enrichment uranium program perhaps located at Kangson. Fourth, we might ask North Korea to come up with a complete freeze of its nuclear activities.

If I were President Moon, and I've been telling him, we should demand those kinds of things from North Korea while asking the US to think about partially lifting sanctions imposed from 2016 onward. If that is not doable, then maybe at least we can move forward on Kaesong and Mount Kumgang.

Alex Ward

It sounds like you're saying the American stance isn't helping President Moon's desire for closer South Korean-North Korean relations.

Moon Chung-in

It's been really harmful. United Nations Command has been much tougher on the North-South Korean transactions across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The United States has put on a full-court press to confine South Korean interactions with North Korea.

Alex Ward

What has been the Trump administration's response to Seoul's concerns?

Moon Chung-in

I cannot tell you, but the United States has not accommodated South Korean requests.

Alex Ward

Why do you think that is?

Moon Chung-in

Because this is the American position: North Korea must make very concrete steps toward complete denuclearization before anything else happens. No exceptions. There is no flexibility.

That is why North Korea is pounding the table: “You come up with more concrete proposals. Then we’ll consider attending working-level talks.” Pyongyang is extremely cautious. It doesn’t want another Hanoi.

The Trump administration has to come up with a very concrete road map and time table for negotiating the settlement of the North Korean nuclear problem. But I don’t see any clear unity of purpose among the White House and bureaucratic agencies in dealing with North Korea. It’s no wonder why Pyongyang is so confused.

Alex Ward

Is South Korea confused about the US handling of North Korea?

Moon Chung-in

We are somewhat confused, because on the one hand we had the expectation that the United States would come up with a more flexible approach toward North Korea, but on the other hand we haven’t seen any realization of this flexible approach. Our general understanding is that the US has not sent a very clear signal to Pyongyang.



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un poses with South Korean President Moon Jae-in on the top of Mount Paektu in North Korea on September 20, 2018. *Pyongyang Press Corps/Pool/Getty Images*

Alex Ward

That's a problem, because North Korea's deadline for a deal is the end of the year. But from my vantage point — speaking with American and South Korean officials — it doesn't look like we're close to a deal and everyone will miss the deadline.

Is that your view as well? And if so, what is the plan if that deadline is missed?

Moon Chung-in

If there is no deal between Kim and President Trump by the end of the year, then Kim must offer a new way forward to the North Korean people. He has to, just for his own domestic politics. Therefore I am somewhat worried we may miss the deadline.

Alex Ward

Are you confident at all that they'll make a deal before 2020?

Moon Chung-in

It's not a matter of confidence, it's a matter of mandate. To avoid a disastrous outcome on the Korean Peninsula, Trump and Kim must come up with more workable proposals and produce tangible outcomes. But after working on it for more than a year, there haven't been any tangible successes.

Both leaders now need at least a small step forward. That's the most important thing to focus on. North Korea won't accept the "big deal" right now.

Alex Ward

You mean the final, fully verified dismantling of North Korea's nuclear program before receiving economic benefits?

Moon Chung-in

Right, that won't work. There should be some compromise. As I pointed out, the North Korean proposal is a sensible proposal, but it will be very difficult for the US to accept it because it's less than its stated position.

Alex Ward

So if a nuclear deal might not be made by the end of the year, could something else be done?

Moon Chung-in

I have been arguing for diplomatic normalization. The US could offer that up right now.

Alex Ward

By that do you mean a peace deal of some sort?

Moon Chung-in

No, I mean diplomatic normalization.

Alex Ward

Embassies?

Moon Chung-in

Embassies.

Alex Ward

So you want an American embassy in Pyongyang and a North Korean embassy in Washington?

Moon Chung-in

Yes, and in return North Korea should come up with some concrete progress toward denuclearization. That could be a very important starting point. We've got to be more imaginative and come up with some proposals which have not been heard of in the past.



People watch a television news screen showing a file footage of North Korea's missile launch, at a railway station in Seoul on August 6, 2019. *Jung Yeon-je/AFP/Getty Images*

Alex Ward

Many would surely be skeptical of not only making that kind of deal but doing it before the end of the year. Is it wrong to be skeptical of that?

Moon Chung-in

I don't think it's wrong. But the hope is President Moon will mention some creative proposals to Trump during their Monday meeting at the UN. I don't know to what extent Trump would accept them, but he wants a surprising approach, not old ones.

Alex Ward

Trump is definitely open to new ways of handling foreign policy.

Moon Chung-in

I agree with you.

Alex Ward

What percentage chance would you give the US and North Korea making some kind of deal by year's end. Not the big, final deal, just any deal to move things forward?

Moon Chung-in

More than 70 percent.

Alex Ward

Really? 70? Seven-zero?

Moon Chung-in

Yes, and it'll be meaningful. Not just a pro forma agreement on something that doesn't really matter.

Alex Ward

What does that meaningful deal look like? Yongbyon plus alpha?

Moon Chung-in

Yes, and maybe North Korea will propose a complete freeze of its nuclear activities in addition to freezing nuclear missile tests.

Alex Ward

So just to be clear, you're saying there's more than a 70 percent change that by the end of this year North Korea will agree to dismantle Yongbyon and perhaps freeze its nuclear development?

Moon Chung-in

Yes, those are very workable propositions. But it all depend upon what kinds of corresponding measures the US can come up with.

Alex Ward

And that would be partial sanctions relief, right?

Moon Chung-in

Right.

Alex Ward

But in Hanoi, North Korea basically asked for all the most important sanctions to be lifted before dismantling Yongbyon.

Moon Chung-in

It's a negotiation.

Alex Ward

A maximum one, in that case.

Moon Chung-in

Sure, but I would say North Korea wants partial sanctions relief enough that it may agree to resume working with South Koreans at Kaesong and the Mount Kumgang Tourist Project again.



Cafe Kumgang Chorong in the former meeting point between families from North and South Korea on September 13, 2011 in Kumgang, North Korea. *Eric Lafforgue/Art In All Of Us/Corbis via Getty Images*

Alex Ward

That, too?

Moon Chung-in

And also some sort of political assurance involving diplomatic normalization talks between Washington and Pyongyang, plus some moves toward transformation of the armistice agreement into some sort of peace treaty. I think North Korea will want all of these things.

Alex Ward

Well, yes, North Korea might want all of these things, but that's a lot to agree to in such a short amount of time. What makes you so confident it will all happen?

Moon Chung-in

The reason is very simple: President Trump wants some kind of deal and Kim wants some kind of deal. The two leaders are committed to making a deal, but the proposals of course must be mutually acceptable. I would say now they are going through the adjustment period of fine tuning their agendas.

For example: North Korean Vice Foreign Minister [Choe Sun Hui](#) made it clear last week that Pyongyang will consider complete denuclearization if all the threats to her country are

removed. Her statement is somewhat counter to what North Korean officials have been saying recently, which is “no denuclearization.” Her statement reversed the trend.

So what does that mean? North Korea wants some kind of deal with United States. Kim also knows that if they miss this chance with Trump or if they change course next year that it will have a completely different relationship with the United States. So they likely want to have some kind of deal before the end of this year. North Korea surely hopes Trump is reelected so they can keep progress going.

Alex Ward

So I get that you’re confident of a smaller agreement, but what do you believe happens if there is no progress at all by December 31?

Moon Chung-in

Then we may go back to 2017 or a worse situation.

Alex Ward

The “fire and fury” era, you mean?

Moon Chung-in

Sadly, yes.

The worst situation would be an American military attack on North Korea. I hope that would not take place.

But, from North Korea’s perspective, if there’s no deal, then it may start testing long-range missiles again and possibly its seventh nuclear bomb. At that point, what’s Trump’s option? He would have to deal with that kind of behavior very resolutely. Then we’re back to where we were two years ago: bloody noses and threats of war.



A painting on a float representing President Trump and Kim Jong-Un pushing the nuclear red button at the Basel Carnival in Switzerland, on July 25, 2018. Andia/Universal Images Group via Getty Images