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[INTERVIEW] 'There's no way out if US sees North Korea through its frame'



Moon Chung-in, a special presidential adviser for unification, diplomacy and national security affairs, speaks during an interview with The Korea Times at his office in Seoul last week. / Korea Times photo by Shim Hyun-chul

Moon's top aide hits US's crime and punishment point of view

By Kim Bo-eun, Kim Yoo-chul

Differences between South Korea and the United States on how to push North Korea's denuclearization are standing out more than ever as progress is being seen in inter-Korean relations.

Only a year ago, North Korea was conducting missile tests, prompting fears of war. But icy relations began to thaw with the North's participation in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics early this year.

The budding detente bloomed into three summits between President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in six months, which produced agreements on ending the 1950-53 Korean War within the year and setting up buffer zones along the border area to ease military tension.

Amid such developments, the Moon administration has begun to take a more proactive stance in inter-Korean matters, stating advancement in relations between the South and North can help bring progress in Pyongyang's denuclearization.

This is creating a rift with the U.S., as it remains firm in its stance that progress in inter-Korean affairs and denuclearization should complement each other.

Washington remains largely skeptical of the North Korean leader's intention to denuclearize.

Amid these circumstances, a special adviser to the President stated a paradigm shift may be necessary.

"The U.S. views North Korea in the frame of crime and punishment —- this is its social construct of reality that North Korea cheats and lies," Moon Chung-in, a special presidential adviser for unification, diplomacy and national security affairs, told The Korea Times in an interview at his office last week.

"But if it only looks at Pyongyang through this frame there is no way out. There needs to be a more pragmatic, flexible approach to North Korea."

Stalled talks

Moon attributes the stall in denuclearization talks between North Korea and the U.S. to differences surrounding when to lift sanctions.

"Basically the stance of the U.S. is that sanctions will be lifted when North Korea achieves complete denuclearization, which North Korea cannot accept," he said.

He pointed out that while Pyongyang initially called only for a declaration ending the war, it is now stating this is not enough because Kim offered to permanently dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear facility in his third summit with Moon held in Pyongyang. The U.S., meanwhile, wants North Korea to disclose its nuclear arsenal and submit to inspections, the adviser said.

However, Pyongyang would be unwilling to report its entire nuclear inventory for two reasons, he said.

"First, why would North Korea hand over a list of its inventory while relations with the U.S. are still hostile? This would leave the regime defenseless," Moon said.

The other reason is based on the inherent nature of declaring inventory.

"The U.S. states that North Korea has 60 to 65 nuclear warheads, but if it has less than this amount, the U.S. will never believe it even if Pyongyang makes a declaration. Washington will continue to call for additional reports and the process will fall through. This will leave North Korea in a worse situation than before making the report."

This is why Pyongyang is calling for a trust relationship to be built first, he said.

"The North is seeking a non-aggression relationship through the declaration ending the war, and for the U.S. to take corresponding measures for the shutting down of the Yongbyon facility in a verifiable way —- such as lifting sanctions," he said.

Inter-Korean relations should lead the denuclearization process

The U.S. has been calling for South Korea to slow things down with the North, to align this with progress in denuclearization talks.

"It is difficult for the South Korean government to accept this because it could endanger not only talks between the U.S. and North Korea but also inter-Korean relations. Then the process to establish a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula will be hampered and everything will be held hostage," Moon said.

"The Pyongyang summit last month proved that progress in inter-Korean relations can lead to a breakthrough in stalled talks between North Korea and the U.S."

Conditions

With these discussions comes the issue of sanctions. The Moon administration has been eagerly seeking international support to alleviate these, but under certain conditions.

"This would be denuclearization measures that would take the North Korean nuclear program to an irreversible state —- what was referred to as frontloading measures," the presidential adviser said.

"Wouldn't promising the alleviation of sanctions be an incentive for Pyongyang to take such action?"

At the same time, he stressed this would depend on the extent to which the North would be willing to take denuclearization steps.

"This would mean taking a plus alpha measure in addition to permanently shutting down the Yongbyon facility. It would be best to take out nuclear warheads and intercontinental ballistic missiles and dismantle them. And then it should report and open up for inspections, but this would again depend on the incentives the U.S. would provide."

Building peace regime

One of the pillars of building trust is declaring an end to the Korean War, which Pyongyang has called for.

"This would be a political statement that puts an end to the state of war on the Korean Peninsula that has remained in place since the armistice in 1953," he said.

This would entail the North ending its hostile relationship with the South and the U.S., which would be done through a non-aggression declaration or accord, the adviser said.

He noted that the situation on the peninsula after the declaration ending the war, but without a peace treaty, would need the maintenance of the military demarcation line, the United Nations Command and the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission.

"It would not affect the status of the U.S. forces stationed here," he said.

"The declaration ending the war is like a gentlemen's agreement or goodwill gesture. It will lend an impetus to North Korea's denuclearization and enable discussions to begin on a peace treaty," he said.

At the same time, he pointed out, "Talks on a peace treaty would begin once North Korea has taken denuclearization action to the extent it is irreversible. It would begin when there is a shared notion that Pyongyang will no longer make nuclear threats — otherwise the U.S. will have no reason to accept this."

Human rights issue

For North Korea, human rights is a thorny issue; so Moon says it should be brought up at a later time.

"This would be when Pyongyang has denuclearized to a significant extent," he said.

But he noted, "The issue would need to be addressed for diplomatic relations to be established between Pyongyang and Washington. It won't be enough for North Korea to denuclearize. It needs to shut down political prison camps and address the human rights problem in order to have diplomatic normalization with the U.S."



[Kim Bo-eun](mailto:bkim@koreatimes.co.kr)bkim@koreatimes.co.kr