

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

# Trump's failure is Biden's chance on North Korea

South Korean presidential adviser tells Asia Times how Trump misplayed and Biden can revive talks with Kim Jong Un

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FEBRUARY 9, 2021

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North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un speaks as he stands with US President Donald Trump south of the Military Demarcation Line that divides North and South Korea, in the Joint Security Area (JSA) of Panmunjom in the Demilitarized zone (DMZ) on June 30, 2019. Photo: AFP

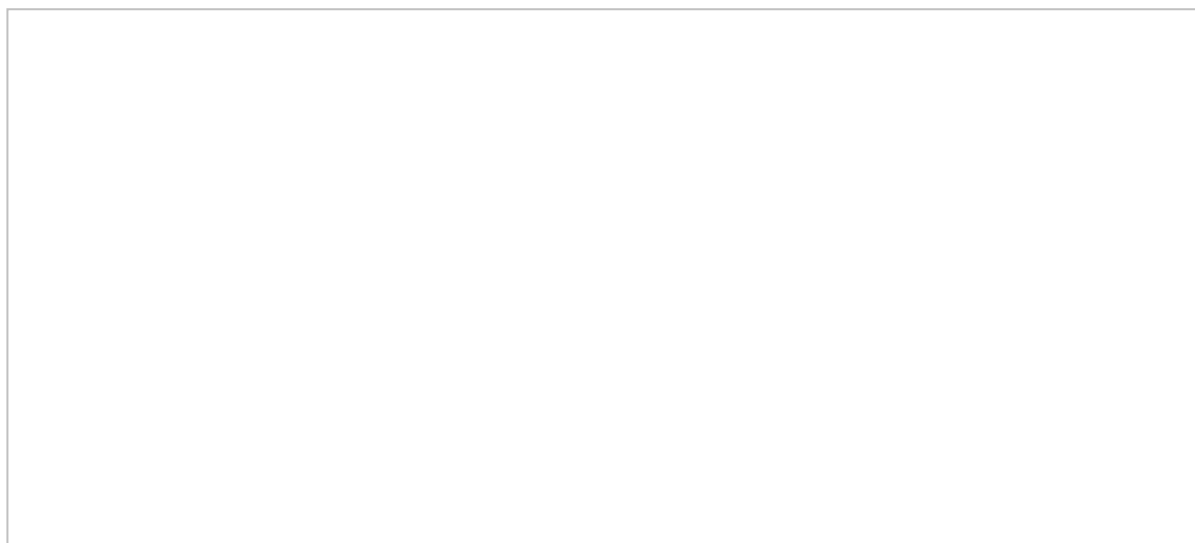
*This is the second installment of a three part series. Read part one [here](#).*

SEOUL – Academic Moon Chung-in, special adviser to South Korea President Moon Jae-in on foreign affairs and national security, has been perhaps the most influential figure in the three Seoul administrations that have chosen to engage North Korea.

In the first part of this exclusive interview series, Moon spoke of the “historical mandate” to bring peace and prosperity to the Korean Peninsula through engagement with North Korea.

In this part, he explains why he believes North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is sincere about nuclear disarmament; looks back on the highs of possibility and the lows of disappointment during ex-US president Donald Trump’s dalliance with Kim; and offers engagement pointers to the nascent Joe Biden administration.

Perhaps the notable attribute of Pyongyangologists is cynicism. It is rare to find one who believes that Kim is truly willing to give up the core asset that both protects his state and grants it relevance in global society – his nuclear arsenal.



According to this argument, the foremost priority of the Kims is survival. There are no known internal threats to the regime, but with Japan, South Korea and most especially the United States postured against North Korea, atomic arms provide a deterrent against attack.

Moreover, the country has sacrificed its economy on the altar of atomic arms – weaponized fissile materials (both plutonium and highly-enriched uranium); warheads; ballistic missiles; and the vehicles (road-based launchers and more recently submarines) that grant missiles mobility and survivability.

Colossal quantities of national blood, sweat and tears have been expended acquiring this “sacred sword” – a sword few other nations could possibly possess. So, given the hostility of external rivals, the failures of all prior deals, and the noted perfidy of the regime – Pyongyang will never agree to abandon nuclear arms *in toto*.

These are the core elements of the argument. Moon, however, begs to differ.



Moon Chung-in is one of the leading brains behind South Korea's attempt to engage with North Korea. Photo: Courtesy Moon Chung-in.

He cites not just leader-to-leader commitments, but surprisingly public statements made in and to North Korea as the basis of his belief.

Following the inter-Korean summit in Panmunjom in April 2018, and the historic and unprecedented North Korea-US summit in Singapore in June, the daddy of all inter-Korean summits took place in Pyongyang in September.

Moon was there as part of President Moon Jae-in's delegation.

“After the Pyongyang summit on September 19, Kim Jong Un, for the first time, said openly, ‘We have committed to make every effort to turn the Korean peninsula into a land of peace free from nuclear weapons and nuclear threat,’ Moon recalled. “South Korean critics used to say that unless Moon Jae-in got a verbal assurance on denuclearization, the summit would be a failure, so the Moon government worked very hard to get that.”

Moreover, a very public statement was made when President Moon joined Kim in the North's huge May Day stadium before a capacity crowd.

“I was sitting in the front row of the stadium. President Moon gave a speech and said, ‘I agreed with Chairman Kim to get rid of nuclear weapons and create peace on the Korean peninsula for our descendants,’” Moon recalled. “150,000 North Koreans gave him an enthusiastic applause. That showed North Korea is really committed to denuclearize.”

Many might say the regime had corralled these citizens – who were, anyway, loyal members of the Pyongyang elite. Moon differs. Dubbing the moment “historic,” he called the public response, “a collective expression of willingness to denuclearize.”

“150,000 Pyongyang citizens heard it and showed an unexpected support! 150,000 is almost one-tenth of Pyongyang's population, and they constitute the core of the public in North Korea,” Moon said. “To give a South Korea leader the chance to give a talk at the May 1<sup>st</sup> Stadium was unprecedented.”

Indeed, in 2007, then-South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun had sought to include a denuclearization commitment in the joint summit declaration, but the North, then led by Kim Jong Il, had refused.

Further proof of sincerity came via state media.

“Another noticeable change was that the Rodong Shimnum, the official daily newspaper of the Korea Workers’ Party, reported on two leaders’ discussion on denuclearization,” Moon said. “That was unusual, for the denuclearization issue had been considered taboo.”

### **The stage is set**

Seoul, dedicated to playing an intermediary role between the US and the North, had worked to draw commitments from Pyongyang ahead of the second North Korea-US summit in early 2019. The resultant commitments were legitimate, Moon says.

In the post-summit Pyongyang Declaration, Article 5 stipulated that North Korea would dismantle its Dongchang-ri ballistic missile engine test facility and launch pad, and would consider dismantling Yongbyon completely, for good.

“That was the first time a North Korean leader, in written form, had given very specific suggestions,” Moon said. “President Moon had tried very hard to get Yongbyon on the table.”

Yongbyon is North Korea’s central nuclear facility, the core of its two (plutonium and HEU-based) nuclear programs. It contains a 5-megawatt nuclear reactor, a fuel fabrication plant, a radio-chemical reprocessing plant for plutonium, a tritium-producing lab for hydrogen bombs, and HEU production facilities.

“There are some 470 buildings there!” Moon said. “Getting rid of all of them is a really big deal” he added – citing Siegfried Hecker, a former director of the

US atomic arms lab at Los Alamos, who has spoken of the centrality of Yongbyon.

So, an offer was in place. And given Trump's precedent-smashing *modus operandi* – no prior US president had previously met a North Korean leader until Singapore – Moon had high expectations for the second summit.

“Trump's summit diplomacy was innovative and creative and I evaluate him very highly,” Moon said, particularly given the pushback he faced from officials. “Some of Trump's staff strongly opposed meeting Kim,” Moon recalled. “I was told Trump scolded them – he said, ‘Why did previous presidents fail with North Korea? Because that kind of bureaucratic thinking prevailed!’”

Trump's “transactional” approach toward North Korea, Moon believes, “was right, it was imaginative and it was positive.”

The second Kim-Trump summit was set for Hanoi, Vietnam, in February 2019. Singapore had delivered a broad framework for bilateral relations. Hanoi was expected to seal a deal – a deal that would begin to clear the distrust and tensions that had clouded Pyongyang-Washington relations since the Korean War ended uneasily in 1953.

The Koreans, and the world, looked on. Hopes were peaking. But what eventuated in Hanoi would be “the biggest lost opportunity” of Moon's career.





Donald Trump with Kim Jong Un in Hanoi summit talks in February 2019. Photo: AFP

## Trump walks

Kim arrived with specific proposals for “complete and permanent dismantling of the Yongbyon nuclear facilities in return for lifting five UN sanction resolutions related to the civil economy and people’s livelihoods,” Moon said.

Though the deal did not encompass a separate, suspected uranium processing facility at Kanson, near Pyongyang, or his existing stockpile of warheads, Moon was confident in the well-regarded US special envoy for North Korea Stephen Biegun, who believed he could convince Trump to reciprocate what Kim was offering.

But Trump was distracted by the Michael Cohen congressional hearings then underway. And his hawkish National Security Advisor John Bolton held different views to Biegun.

Citing Bolton's memoir, *The Room Where it Happened*, Moon notes that Bolton read Biegun's proposal during his flight and was unhappy about it. Bolton called then-vice president Mike Pence, who intervened with the White House chief of staff. A second US position was hastily drafted.

Bolton subsequently arrived in Hanoi with the re-draft. The new US proposal demanded full disclosure of all North Korean nuclear facilities, missile programs, and biological and chemical weapons programs.

That was the crux, though the US was offering only partial sanctions relief and no credible security guarantees. Even so, what Kim had offered was a "small deal" of action-for-action, trust-building measures. Trump, however, went for broke by demanding an all-in "big deal."

The result? No deal.

"Kim really wanted a deal, but Trump kicked it away," Moon said. "The US should realize that it cannot make progress on denuclearization of North Korea without making small successes that are vital to initial trust-building between the two."

The Cohen imbroglio may have contributed. "From the domestic political point of view, it might have been better to return to Washington with no deal than with some deal that could have been subject to intense criticism by the opposition," Moon admitted.

Moon says he considers Bolton the villain. "Trump could have come up with some deal with Kim Jong Un and changed the entire landscape on the Korean Peninsula," he said. "I would say it was carefully orchestrated sabotage by Bolton that derailed the Hanoi summit."

Seoul, which had hoped to initiate inter-Korean projects in the wake of a North Korea-US deal, was stunned.



“We never expected Trump to just walk out! The Moon government had a really bitter feeling about how Trump handled the Hanoi summit,” Moon said. “I was very angry at president Trump and his staff. They kicked away the golden opportunity.”

It is unclear how much damage Hanoi's failure has done to Kim's future policy initiatives, but it was certainly a blow to his prestige in the eyes of both his elite and wider public.

“It took 60 hours for Kim to travel to Hanoi [by train],” Moon said. “He went back to Pyongyang with empty hands and lost face.”

Kim and Trump would meet briefly again during a photo op at the Korean DMZ in June 2019, and Trump would fire Bolton amid considerable recriminations. Still, the damage had been done.

“Success begets success,” Moon said. “And failure begets failure.”

Subsequent North Korea-US working-level negotiations went nowhere. South Korea, due to its alliance with the US, was collaterally damaged. Inter-Korean relations are now frozen.

The question now is whether Biden will resurrect the engagement process pioneered by Trump. Moon believes Kim's 2019 Hanoi deal could be brought back from the dead.



Then-US vice president Joe Biden looks towards North Korea from Observation Post Ouellette during a tour of the Demilitarized Zone which has separated the two Koreas since the Korean War, on December 7, 2013. Photo: AFP/Pool/Lee Jin-man

## Biden's turn

“Biden’s team should examine the North Korean proposals very seriously,” he advised. “In my opinion, the Hanoi proposals were really good and sensible.”

Given the vast amount of power vested in the person of Kim, Moon also advises maintaining leader-to-leader contact rather than relying on working-level meetings.

“Summit diplomacy can still be a good avenue through which to solve the North Korean nuke issue,” he said. “The Biden administration will certainly favor a bottom-up approach, but North Korean counterparts have no power and authority – leading to nowhere.”

Summits may be a hard sell for Biden given the venomous feelings felt toward Trump's legacy in the Democratic Party and a belief in some quarters that the ex-president granted Kim "legitimacy" simply by meeting him.

Moon suggests a middle ground: A high-level, dedicated envoy.

"I suggest Biden appoint a senior policy coordinator on North Korea, in close coordination with Congress, to reactivate dialog," he said. "Then, Kim would meet."

Moon named former secretary of state John Kerry, or former undersecretary of state for political affairs Wendy Sherman – who worked in the Obama and Clinton administrations on the Iranian and North Korean nuclear negotiations – as figures with the necessary prestige and experience.

Philosophically, he offered further advice that may be alien to a US leader.

"I hope Biden offers strategic humility, cognitive empathy and rejects this idea of good and evil," Moon urged. "Don't demonize North Korea! See it as it is, not as you wish to see it."

Given Biden's emphasis on allies and alliances, Moon suggested a multilateral approach. "Consult with South Korea very closely," he said.

He also advised breathing life back into the "six-party talks" format. The Beijing-sponsored negotiations, which took place between 2003-2007, attempted to resolve North Korean nuclear issues by bringing together China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea and the US.

Despite multiple rounds of tortuous negotiations, they ground to a standstill in 2009. Moon suggested they be restarted at a different level with a wider mandate.

“The Biden administration might consider the resurrection of the six-party talks – but at the leadership-summit level, that is the only way,” he said.  
“Then, the US can repair its damaged relations with China by taking advantage of Korean Peninsula issues.”

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