

Chung-in Moon: "There are no viable options except engagement in dealing with North Korea."



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The National Interest speaks with a top adviser to South Korea's President Moon.

by John Dale Grover 

South Korean President Moon Jae-in has been holding summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in an effort to build trust and a long-lasting peace between both countries. Dr. Chung-in Moon is President

Moon's special advisor for unification, diplomacy and national security affairs. Dr. Moon is widely recognized as one of the top experts on inter-Korean affairs and is known for his academic and government work.

John Dale Grover interviewed Dr. Moon concerning the future of inter-Korean relations. This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

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What lesson or principle have you learned about North Korea that Americans should know about but don't?

“North Korea is an impossible state,” “Kim Jong-un is a crazy and impulsive leader,” “Pyongyang relies on a playbook of perpetual cheating and fake peace offensives,” and “negotiation with North Korea is futile.” This is how mainstream American commentary, by experts, officials, and commentators, characterizes North Korea and its leadership. After having interacted with that leadership up close, I have learned that Washington stereotyping has little to do with the actual reality.

North Korea is not an impossible state, but a reasonable state to work with. Its leader is neither crazy nor impulsive, but well versed in international affairs, sane and rational, and even decisive and persuasive. It is true that the North has developed a habit of cheating, but the boundary between cheating and hedging has often been blurry, and our behavior was not blameless. Hedging behavior, on both sides, can be corrected by mutual communication and trust-building.

Those who insist on the futility of engaging and negotiating with the North commit the fallacy of self-deceiving prophecy. The whole point of diplomacy is making Pyongyang come to the negotiation table, even if it appears unwilling to do so. At a moment like this, when Kim is clearly willing to negotiate, insisting on futility would squander a historic opportunity.

Where do you see Kim Jong-un's prioritization of economic growth heading in the next ten or twenty years?

The most remarkable phenomenon I witnessed during my visit to Pyongyang in September 2018 was the change of slogan from “military first politics” to “economy first politics.”

Economic prosperity was the buzzword all over town. Economic discourse featured the idea of “leapfrogging and catching-up through scientific and technological progress.” Those with whom I talked in Pyongyang were genuinely interested in the 4th Industrial Revolution.

Albeit economically backward, they believe that they can catch up with countries in the region through technological innovation. No wonder why—Kim Jong-un bowed in public to more than one thousand faculty members and students of the Kim Chaek Institute of Science and Technology, the MIT of North Korea, on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of its founding. Other top priorities include infrastructural development, the secure supply of energy, promotion of the consumer sector, systematic development of special economic zones, and the revitalization of rust industrial belt in the northeast region—all to be accomplished over the next ten to twenty years.

As President Trump stressed during his recent CBS interview, “He (Kim Jong-un) has a chance to have North Korea be a tremendous economic behemoth. It has a chance to be one of the great economic countries in the world.” But all this would not be realizable without undertaking corresponding institutional transformation for reform and opening and the cultivation of new entrepreneurial class—in other words, reinventing North Korea. And of course, without denuclearization.

How can observers better understand North Korea’s intentions and capabilities?

It is essential to read North Korea’s original texts (e.g., Rodong Shinmun and Korea Central News Agency or KCNA) rather than rely on Western media commentary. Outside commentators are often the source of biased and distorted observation of North Korea. We also need to avoid the fallacy of overestimation and underestimation that was, by and large, responsible for intelligence failure of South Korea and the West.

The current North Korean nuclear quagmire could have been prevented if we made an objective and more realistic analysis of its intentions and capabilities. An earlier underestimation that Pyongyang is not ready for nuclear and ballistic missile capability and later overestimation that North Korea can now attack the U.S. mainland with its intercontinental ballistic missiles have critically undermined chances for a negotiated settlement of the North Korean nuclear problem.

Underestimation of North Korea’s regime durability and adaptability to economic sanctions also has hindered effective handling of North Korea. Finally, we need to pay attention to William Perry’s dictum: “we must deal with North Korean realities as they are—not as we wish they were or might have been.”

Why do you believe that continued engagement is the right way to approach North Korea?

It is the right way because North Korea has shown positive responses to engagement policy, while showing negative responses to sanctions and pressures.

Since President Trump and President Moon have embraced an engagement initiative, Pyongyang has responded positively by suspending nuclear tests and missile tests as well as conventional military

provocations. The North Korean leader has further expressed bold words and commitments, such as the dismantling of a nuclear test site, ballistic missile engine test and launching facilities, and nuclear facilities in Yongbyon. Kim Jong-un has committed to the “complete denuclearization” before the world and, more importantly, to his own people. In the meantime, Pyongyang has been cooperative in reaching agreements on a wide range of issues and implementing operational arms control with the South such as the suspension of hostility on the ground, on the sea, and in the air.

Furthermore, there are no viable options except engagement in dealing with North Korea. Whereas sanctions and maximum pressures have been of limited effect, military options are unacceptable because of devastating collateral damage.

It should also be noted that unprecedented chemistry among Trump, Moon, and Kim would make the engagement work this time. Firmly established channels of communication and some sort of trust-building among them, coupled with the convergence of their motives and interests (economic prosperity for Kim, peace for Moon, and political achievement for Trump) are likely to yield some positive outcomes of engagement.

In what ways might South Korea and the United States improve communication with North Korea during a crisis?

We now have a completely different environment from the past. The United States maintains communication channels with North Korea at summit, high-level, and working-levels. South Korea has also communication channels with North Korea at all levels and in multiple functional areas. South Korea has also set up a liaison office in Gaesung that operates all day, twenty-four hours. South Korea and the United States have established a working group that is being held every two weeks. Going forward, it would be useful for South Korea, North Korea, and America to institutionalize a trilateral crisis monitoring and management mechanism. If the United States and North Korea progress toward normalization of relations, that would of course also dramatically improve their ability to sustain dialogue, including during a period of crisis.

Which organizations and methods do you think are the most helpful in fostering inter-Korean dialogue and understanding?

When inter-Korean relations were completely broken, third party interventions were needed to foster inter-Korean dialogue and understanding. It is more so because the North has refused to have any meaningful dialogue with the South while attempting to improve communication with the United States, which is called the stance of “tongmi bongnam (communicate with America, while blocking the South).”

Since the latest rapprochement, however, the North discarded that worn tactic and has instead been utilizing Seoul as a means to improve communication with Washington. Now inter-Korean dialogue and understanding are robust, and it is time for us to come up with more creative and flexible ways to take full advantage of this rare opportunity to further our common goal of a denuclearized Korean peninsula. However, third-party facilitation might be still needed in the areas of military confidence-building, arms control, and international trade and investment.

What are some assumptions or faulty reasoning you see common among Korean watchers, and how can they avoid them?

One of the most pronounced faulty assumptions is the demonization of North Korea, which forms the basis of the “impossible state” and “futility” theses mentioned above. Demons neither change nor negotiate, and thus Korean watchers conclude from the outset that negotiation with the North is futile. To them, the only real solution is to destroy North Korea. Korea watchers judge North Korea’s present and future behavior by its past behavior. They refuse to see any change in its behavior, falling into a negative self-fulfilling prophecy. This perceptual trap can be avoided by adopting a two-way understanding. Placing oneself in other’s shoes is the best remedial measure to correct this mistake.

Another faulty reasoning is the logic of crime and punishment. Since the North has committed a crime, it should be punished regardless of its changing behavior. Such a negative reinforcement strategy has backfired. Believing itself innocent, Pyongyang has responded in a more ferocious manner. It is now the time to deliberate on the adoption of “positive reinforcement” strategy. Notwithstanding its past bad behavior, rewarding North Korea’s current good behavior can foster its behavioral modification in a more positive direction.

Unilateralism poses another problem. It is undeniable that the United States is a superpower, whereas North Korea is a small state. Asymmetry between the two is inevitable. But North Korea is not a defeated country and treating it as such will not result in successful negotiations. There should be a compromise that is mutually acceptable. Unilateral imposition of American views and interests could make the situation worse. North Korea’s strategic culture shaped by Kim Il-sung has made North Koreans cope with such unilateral approach by doubling down on recalcitrance.

Finally, Korean watchers in the United States need to have a more realistic and flexible attitude on North Korea. Pyongyang is not likely to accommodate American demand of “dismantle first, reward later.” If the choice is framed as “all or nothing,” Washington will continue to get nothing.

John Dale Grover is an assistant managing editor for The National Interest. He is also a fellow with Defense Priorities and a writer with Young Voices. His articles have appeared in Real Clear World, The

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Image: Reuters.

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