

This interview with PCI Board Member, Chung-in Moon, appeared in the Washington Times on Sunday, April 23, 2023.

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In Seoul, a voice for a new approach to the North Korea problem

Yoon faces pressure ahead of U.S. visit to forge new direction



American and South Korean flags hang from the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on the White House campus, Friday, April 21, 2023, in Washington. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and his wife Kim Keon Hee are scheduled to attend a ... [more >](#)

By [Andrew Salmon](#) - *The Washington Times* - Sunday, April 23, 2023

[SEOUL](#), [South Korea](#) — The flashpoint Korean Peninsula faces a slew of challenges with the nuclear-use threshold lowered, a regional arms race underway, diplomacy dead and communications channels silent.

The Russia-Ukraine war is offering [North Korea](#) fresh opportunities to exit its diplomatic and economic isolation, putting even more pressure on South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol as he prepares for a state visit this week to Washington that was supposed to celebrate the coming 70th anniversary of the U.S.-South Korean alliance.

Now a leading liberal voice in [Seoul](#) on nuclear issues is urging the conservative Mr. Yoon and President Biden to look to the example set by President Trump and reopen “imaginative and realistic” communication with [Kim Jong-un](#), the North’s mercurial leader.

“Now is one of the worst times ever,” said Moon Chung-in, vice chairman of the Asia-Pacific Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation. “U.S.-[North Korea](#) relations have hit rock bottom, China has become a kind of bystander — it is moving away from peninsula issues — and inter-Korean relations are very bad.”

Mr. Moon has a deep familiarity with the crisis, having advised all three South Korean presidents who have summited with North Korean leaders, and has joined every presidential delegation that [Seoul](#) has dispatched to Pyongyang over the years.

“[North Korea](#) is an existential threat, so we have to prepare for any kind of military provocation, but at the same time, we should come up with dialogue and negotiations,” he said in an interview. “But we have only the first component; the second is all gone.”

Though Mr. Moon is a leading voice in liberal circles, he praises the unorthodox, personal approach taken by Mr. Trump. “Trump knew there is only one person who makes decisions in [North Korea](#), and that is [Kim Jong-un](#),” he said.

A 2018 Kim-Trump summit in Singapore laid the groundwork for a second summit in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2019. There, Mr. [Kim](#) offered up his central nuclear facility, Yongbyon, in return for partial sanctions relief.

That cautious starting point could have led to an ongoing process of building trust, but Mr. Trump, pressed by more hawkish aides such as National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, sought a more aggressive “all or nothing” denuclearization deal and abruptly left the Hanoi meeting.

“He went back with nothing,” Mr. [Moon](#) said. “Trump later confessed to [South Korean President [Moon Jae-in](#)] that Pompeo and Bolton pushed him very hard.”

Neither Mr. Biden nor Mr. Yoon has resurrected Mr. Trump’s outreach, and international tensions and factors on the ground are making matters ever more combustible, Mr. [Moon](#) said.

As tensions swirl around Ukraine and Taiwan, Washington and Beijing have dialed back their roles as mediators of the Korean crisis. As Washington accuses Pyongyang of supplying arms to Moscow, Mr. [Moon](#) said, opportunity beckons for Mr. [Kim](#).

These dynamics “provide extended space for [North Korea](#)’s survival and prosperity, better than its current situation,” he said. “It could be the beneficiary of a newly emerging cold war structure or of bloc diplomacy.”

[Seoul](#) has shot back at the endless rhetorical salvos fired by Pyongyang. The conservative Yoon administration has also called prior policies of engagement with the North “appeasement,” backing itself into a corner, Mr. [Moon](#) said.

“The Yoon government says the Moon government had a submissive attitude toward [[North Korea](#)],” he said. “The dilemma now is they cannot adopt any of those policies — they cannot get out of the current situation.”

Meanwhile, cross-DMZ communications, including those between the leaders, intelligence offices and military commands, have gone silent. The North Koreans “are not answering any of those lines,” Mr. [Moon](#) said.

Nuclear doctrine

Mr. [Moon](#) said the need to lower tensions has become even more critical since [North Korea](#) announced it was modifying its doctrine on when it would use its nuclear arsenal.

Under its new policy, the [Kim](#) regime “will use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states if it deems the non-nuclear state is ‘colluding with nuclear states,’” Gen. Paul LaCamera, head of U.S. forces in Korea, told a congressional hearing last week.

[North Korea](#)’s doctrinal threats are backed up by serious hardware. Pyongyang has unveiled a string of game-changing weapons this year.

Its solid-fuel ballistic missiles can overcome current Japanese and South Korean defense systems. Both countries rely heavily on spotting North Korean launch preparations and preempting with their own strike assets, but pre-launch timings have been significantly cut with solid-fuel propellant.

Another new weapon is the Haeil, a nuclear torpedo that takes the atomic threat out of the clouds and into the depths.

[South Korea](#)’s population densities near the border with the North further complicate defense.

“[South Korea](#) has an immense window of vulnerability. More than 20 million people live in the [Greater [Seoul](#) area] within firing range of artillery and short-range missiles,” Mr. [Moon](#) said. “Look at the array of North Korean offensive weapons. There is no way to defend.”

This broad range of the North’s arsenal, combined with new protocols on when to launch missiles if the leadership is incapacitated, virtually guarantees a second strike if [North Korea](#) is attacked first.

“[Kim](#) and his elite have learned from Iraq and Libya, where they saw the fates of Saddam Hussein and Moammar Gadhafi,” Mr. [Moon](#) said. “If there is a war, it will be the end of the regime and the leader, so they will fight to the last ditch.”

Mr. [Moon](#) said the extended deterrence and the U.S. pledge to defend its ally, which have prevented a major war on the peninsula since the 1953 armistice, are no longer enough.

“The U.S. alliance provides security but not peace,” he said. “I don’t mean I don’t trust the U.S., but the U.S. has capability limitations, and this means there could be a real problem when the real time comes.”

The answer is a new paradigm for the 70-year-old bilateral alliance in the years ahead.

“I want an alliance with the U.S.,” Mr. [Moon](#) said, “but for peace, not for the status quo.”

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