

[INTERVIEW] Korea urged to design new foreign policy, security strategies

2020-05-17 : 17:00



Moon Chung-in, special advisor to President Moon Jae-in for unification, foreign and security affairs, speaks during an interview with The Korea Times at his office in central Seoul, May 14. Korea Times photos by Shim Hyun-chul

'Global village security,' US-China antagonism, nuclear arms race emerge as key factors

By Do Je-hae

The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to bring huge changes to the way Korea approaches foreign policy and security, according to a noted specialist on international relations.

During a recent interview with The Korea Times, Moon Chung-in, special advisor to President Moon Jae-in for unification, foreign and security affairs, underlined the emergence of "global village security" as one of the biggest side effects of the pandemic, as opposed to narrowly defined national security.

In the post-pandemic period, policymakers around the world are becoming acutely aware that no individual country can ensure security on its own. As a result, the distinguished professor at Yonsei University emphasized that a multilateral approach could become the "mainstay of new management of common problems on the global scale."

As vice chairman and executive director of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation

and Disarmament (APLN), the scholar also highlighted deep concerns about an increasing nuclear arms race among the “big powers” after the pandemic is brought under control and urged them to come to an agreement to defuse mounting tension.

As an adviser to the former Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, he attended the first, second and third inter-Korean summits in Pyongyang as a special delegate. With regard to President Moon Jae-in's North Korea policy, the professor stressed that the President will continue to find niches for cooperation and exchanges with North Korea and be able to persuade the U.S. to allow inter-Korean economic projects.

He also noted that Korea's unique combination of institutional infrastructure, competent and devoted medical staff, and cooperation of civil society, in addition to President Moon's effective leadership, have resulted in a paragon response to the pandemic. Taking advantage of its new-found global respect, the professor said Korea will aim to lead the world in other areas as well.

The following is an edited interview with Professor Moon at his APLN office in central Seoul, May 14.

Q) How do you see the impact of COVID-19 on the existing international order?

A) Predicting the exact impact of the pandemic on the international order is not easy. But there are several contending perspectives. First is a pessimistic view. Henry Kissinger argues that as a result of the pandemic, there could be a revival of the new medieval age “walled cities,” seeking protectionism, nationalism and populism, defying the process of globalization. This could be nightmarish scenario.

Second, some others like Professor Joseph Nye at Harvard rejects such a pessimistic view by arguing that the pandemic will not significantly change the international order. When the pandemic is over, the international order will return to normalcy in which China and the U.S. will engage in strategic competition.

Third, Professor Kishore Mahbubani at the National University of Singapore presents a different picture. He contends that the U.S. under President Trump has lost international confidence and that China will replace the U.S. as an international leader in the post-COVID-19 period. This is evidenced by Chinese efforts to project its soft power by giving more medical and economic aid to those countries infected with COVID-19.

Fourth, some even predict a return of American hegemonic leadership in the post-pandemic era. They believe that no one but the U.S. will be able to save the world economy after the pandemic. As the U.S. saved the world economy by creating the GATT and the Bretton Woods monetary system after the World War II, it will be bound to take a more proactive leadership role. This move can take advantage of the China-bashing sentiments pervasive in the Western world, which might in turn result in a divided world reminiscent of the Cold War era.

Finally, several scholars advocate the strengthening of multilateral efforts by arguing that no single country can resolve this COVID-19. There should be collective efforts by the international community because it touches on the issues of the common destiny of the human race. For them, a multilateral approach is the most ideal format in which the role of the United Nations and the World Health Organization could be more strengthened. It is anchored in a normative claim that well-coordinated, collective management of common problems on a global scale should remain the mainstay.

Likewise, there are contending views on what kind of international order would emerge in the post-pandemic period. My personal guess is that as Professor Nye pointed out, the world will return to the existing order after dust settles, the order of the fierce competition between China and the U.S. It could be a much worsened status quo.

Rise of global security

Q) How should Korea and the world cope with the rise of the pandemic as a new factor in diplomatic, security and defense strategies?

A) What is really remarkable about this spread of the pandemic is that it has changed the way we think about national security and foreign policy. Before the coronavirus, we thought about our security in terms of military and economic security. We rarely talked about human security, biological or ecological security. But the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 changed our way of thinking about security in such a way that human security and biological security can be more critical than military and economic security.

Of course, there is a close correlate between biological security and economic security, as evidenced by sudden and immense economic impact of the pandemic. But the military security dimension has become much more complicated. In order to manage economic consequences of the pandemic, governments have to cut down their defense spending, a good news for global security. But some countries are currently taking advantage of the pandemic situation for their own strategic interests. Nevertheless, given the gravity of COVID-19, previous emphasis on military security is bound to be diluted.

Another interesting aspect is that in the past, we have always thought about security in terms of national security. The national population has become the basic unit for which we seek security. However, the current spread of the pandemic showed that the national security concept is fundamentally flawed.

What matters is global security or global village security. It is precisely because we cannot solve the pandemic problem by single country's efforts. There has to be collective international efforts. Sadly, a lot of countries are now talking about protection, isolationism, lockdowns, blockades and so on. That is the worst choice because they are not the solutions to the problem. We are inter-connected and interdependent. We should face the reality.

I want to underscore two things. The pandemic raised the relevance of human and biological security as opposed to military one and the importance of global village security or global security as opposed to national security.

And it has also diverted our attention to the cardinal importance of the common destiny of the human race. We should be reminded ourselves of an old saying of "united, we stand, divided, we fall." Dividing national boundaries and fighting alone must be the losing proposition.



Professor Moon Chung-in poses at his Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) office in central Seoul, May 14. Korea Times photo by Shim Hyun-chul

Korea's paragon response to pandemic

Q) What are the reasons that set Korea's response to COVID-19 apart from other countries?

A) I believe that South Korea's philosophical foundation is different from others.

South Korea combined very wisely two approaches, liberal and communitarian. Following professor John Rawls' liberal prescription, the South Korean government paid the utmost attention to the protection of the worst, while rejecting the utilitarian approach that was advocated in the United Kingdom in the earlier phase of COVID-19.

It also adopted the communitarian approach. While respecting individual liberty, the South Korean government has emphasized the importance of communal over individual interests. Unlike in some parts of the U.S., South Korean citizens have fully complied with government's communitarian approach.

I would say this subtle combination of Rawlsian liberalism with a communitarian approach made the Korean approach distinctively different from other countries.

South Korea's managerial response was sharply different from other countries. It learnt from the past failure and applied it to the preparation of the second wave of COVID-19 by securing sufficient test kits and streamlining hospital facilities.

South Korean epidemic control agencies were effective in quarantining, testing, tracking potentially infected people, and classifying them by symptoms and giving them individualized treatments. They also ideally utilized

all kinds of IT technology in monitoring and sharing information on those infected by COVID-19 on the real time base. They were also good at enhancing transparency as well as public trust in the government through effective communication with citizens.

The South Korean government has also been managing the pandemic without adopting a lockdown approach. For example, China locked down Wuhan. But we didn't lock down Daegu. During the height of the COVID-19, we could still travel to Daegu, its hotspot. This kind of approach allowed openness and transparency, while constantly alerting citizens on the pandemic.

Another distinguishing feature was the cooperation of civil society. The Korean people have demonstrated an enormous civic mind. They had a real communitarian spirit. As with other Confucian societies, Korea has long been known for its people's conformity with authority. But their voluntary compliance with public directives was unprecedented. When the government said "wear a mask," everybody was wearing a mask. [When government said] make social distancing, citizens followed social distancing. It was a victory of Korean civil society and a mature democracy.

But I think the most important difference comes from institutional readiness. We have set up enormous institutional capacity; for example, almost universal medical insurance, extremely easy access to medical doctors, and very low-cost medical services. We could have never effectively dealt with the pandemic without such institutional arrangements.

Finally, I should say about medical community and President Moon Jae-in. Our medical doctors, nurses, and bureaucrats in charge of disease control and quarantine were competent, hard-working, and sacrificial.

Without their devotion, we could have not successfully managed the pandemic. President Moon was humble, but showed his unwavering commitment to fight against the disease. Compare him with President Trump, Boris Johnson, and Shinzo Abe who have been giving almost daily briefings on the pandemic! Unlike them, President Moon did not give any press conference and delegated all the power and authority to medical doctors and bureaucrats. It is really ironical to note that Moon's approval rate was going up, whereas those leaders taking advantage of corona-politics are suffering from lower approval ratings.

Q) What can Korea gain in the long-run from Moon's active COVID-19 diplomacy, talking on the phone with more than 30 heads of states and initiating global teleconferences with leaders?

A) South Korea has been trying hard to increase its soft power through the active pursuit of public diplomacy. But its performance has been by and large mediocre.

Our success story in handling the COVID-19 completely changed Seoul's international image. A growing number of countries, be they developed or developing, have made love calls to Seoul and have been asking its assistance in tackling the pandemic. South Korea has become a country of great soft power. It will continue to serve as a valuable asset for its diplomacy.

Such soft power has been an outcome of Seoul's smart power that refers to a government's ability to formulate a set of foreign and public policies coherently, consistently and efficiently, and implement them effectively. But in the case of COVID-19, the South Korean government has demonstrated enormous smart power.

That smart power, which can be called "the Korean model," has become a universal model. President Moon attempts to transform the Korean experience of fighting against the pandemic into a global or universal standard to share with other countries.

Sharing Korean experiences with and leading others would be good for Korean diplomacy, but any imprudence and arrogance in so doing can easily backfire.

Thus, South Korea should remain humble, prudent, and altruistic.

Sandwiched between Beijing and Washington

Q) Let's talk about the rising U.S-China tension in the COVID-19 world and how Korea should respond to that kind of new pressure on its diplomacy.

A) It's really a pity that China and the U.S. are engaging in very nasty verbal confrontation.

I am very worrisome about China-bashing widespread in the U.S. and Europe. West's China-bashing and Beijing's hysteric and even hostile response seem to be escalating into a clash of civilization between the West and the East which Samuel Huntington warned us more than two decades ago.

Some journalists even argue that we are witnessing a revival of the Yellow Peril of the late 19th century and early 1920s. This is not desirable. That is the road to mutually assured devastation.

Equally gruesome is newly emerging military tension among big powers. While struggling with the pandemic, big powers are all engaging in a nuclear arms race. The U.S. has been strengthening its nuclear arsenal and recently revoked the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Russia has been responding to it by strengthening its nuclear strike capability. China is also bandwagoning the trend.

Recently, the editor-in-chief of the Global Times of China argued that China should have more than 1,000 nuclear bombs. China is known to have about 260 nuclear bombs. The Global Times chief editor argues that with 260 bombs, China cannot secure an effective nuclear deterrence against the U.S. [The editor said] given the intensity of hostility coming from the U.S., China should have more than 1,000 nuclear bombs. That's really stupid and suicidal. We should prevent this kind of chaotic nuclear arms race.

Remember, the COVID-19 is vicious enough. Nuclear weapons, weapons of mass destruction can bring about a much worse situation. COVID-19 does not destroy machines or plants. Nuclear war wipes out everything. It should be unthinkable. I strongly urge policymakers in Washington and Beijing and even Moscow, to take a calmer and prudent attitude. They should return to dialogue and negotiation and formulate some kind of agreements to defuse the current nuclear arms race.

South Korea is an American ally, but it also maintains a strategic partnership with China. It will be extremely difficult for Seoul to take a pro-American balancing strategy or to bandwagon China's rise. Both countries are so valuable countries to our national interests. But now, Seoul is sandwiched between Beijing and Washington, D.C.

To get out of this dilemma, South Korea needs to take a more prudent balancing diplomacy. In so doing, Seoul needs to make a major breakthrough to inter-Korean relations. Improved inter-Korean relations will serve as a very valuable buffer to U.S.-China strategic rivalry on the Korean Peninsula.

Q) How do you see prospects for inter-Korean relations in the post-pandemic period?

A) President Moon strongly desires to improve South-North Korean relations. But there is no response from the North.

On several occasions, he emphasized the importance of renewing South-North Korea relations. On Jan. 7, in his New Year speech, he proposed three things. He proposed individual visits and tourism, particularly by separated families. He also proposed creating an international peace zone within the Demilitarized zone (DMZ), and the two Koreas working together to register some cultural sites in the DMZ as UNESCO cultural heritages. He also proposed the railroad connections between South and North Korea.

On the second anniversary of the Panmunjeom Declaration on April 27, he proposed public health cooperation with the North, especially focusing on COVID-19 related issues. Likewise, inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation have been his top priority. He even said, within the existing U.N. security sanctions regimes, he will find out every possible niche for inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation.

He also made it very clear that despite the U.S. opposition, he will try to find ways to boost inter-Korean economic exchanges and cooperation. There is plenty of room for mutual cooperation. It's time for North Korea to respond to President Moon's call.