

This interview of PCI Board Member, Dr. Chung-in Moon, appeared in the Diplomat on Monday, March 4, 2024.

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Moon Chung-in on Escalating Inter-Korea Tensions and What Lies Ahead

The former special adviser to the South Korean president believes recent moves by Kim Jong Un represent a “brave new world.”

By [Kenji Yoshida](#)

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In this photo provided by the North Korean government, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un speaks at the Supreme People’s Assembly in Pyongyang, North Korea, on Jan. 15, 2024. The content of this image is as provided and cannot be independently verified.

Credit: Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service via AP, File

As the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East grind on, another conflict brews miles away in East Asia.

Wrapping up 2023, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un ordered his military to “thoroughly annihilate” South Korea and the United States if provoked. The saber-rattling continued as Pyongyang [fired](#) some 350 artillery shells into a disputed sea in January, followed by a barrage of [missile tests](#) in recent weeks.

So far, South Korea's response has been fighting fire with fire. President Yoon Suk-yeol has [vowed](#) that its retaliation will be "multiple times stronger" should the North take belligerent actions. Seoul's deepening military pact with Washington and Tokyo since the Camp David Summit last August has amplified the Yoon administration's resolve.

Rising tension in the Korean Peninsula has caused many experts to speculate on what lies ahead. Two leading experts in the United States [argued](#) that the Kim regime has made a "strategic decision" to wage war, whereas an ex-U.S. diplomat [warned](#) of a possible nuclear crisis in the region.

Amid the many uncertainties, The Diplomat spoke to Moon Chung-in, former special adviser for diplomacy and national security to President Moon Jae-in (no relation). Moon, now the James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University and vice chair of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament, shared his views on the recent developments with The Diplomat.

Bracing for War?

Kim Jong Un's warmongering is worsening by the day. This year alone, the regime has launched multiple cruise and ballistic missiles from its western coast, one of which is said to have been topped with a hypersonic glide vehicle.

In the backdrop is Pyongyang's attempt to sway South Korea's legislative elections in April and the U.S. presidential election in November by showcasing its advanced military capabilities.

The Diplomat asked Moon if Kim's military pursuits were merely an attention-seeking maneuver or a forecast of a serious collision course with the South.

"Verbal cues by both Kim Jong Un and Yoon Suk-yeol indicate that planned, large-scale armed conflict between the two Koreas is unlikely," Moon said.

"Take, for instance, Kim's speech from the December 2023 plenary meeting or one from early January. While his language is bellicose in nature, everything is conditional. In other words, Pyongyang's actions are contingent upon the actions of Seoul and vice versa."

Moon, however, cautioned that an "accidental clash and escalation" is plausible given the fraying inter-Korean safety net and the strained dialogue between the two nations.

"Under Yoon's presidency, the 9.19 Comprehensive Military Agreement between the two Koreas was terminated, a buffer zone in the West Sea was nullified, critical communications lines have been suspended, while rearmament in the demilitarized zone has restarted," Moon pointed out, giving examples of how major cords of the safety net have snapped.

"With vital guardrails and infrastructures torn down and shrinking confidence-building measures, unplanned clash and escalation cannot be ruled out," Moon added.

What the North's Policy Shift Really Means

North Korea's latest policy shifts vis-a-vis South Korea have been equally scrutinized by the expert community.

In his New Year's declaration, Kim Jong Un ended the nation's long-time policy of seeking reconciliation and reunification with the South. Besides calling for the demolition of the reunification monument, Kim also labeled South Korea his country's "principal enemy," diverging from decades of Pyongyang's policy toward its neighbor.

The Diplomat asked Moon for his thoughts on the motives behind Kim's sudden move and its implications.

"The 1992 Agreement on Non-aggression, Reconciliation, and Exchange and Cooperation signed between the two Koreas defined inter-Korean relations as a 'special relation' in the course of pursuing unification, yet they had different interpretations," Moon said.

"North Korea aimed for a 'federation or confederation' (*yonbang*) of two Koreas based on the formula of one ethnic nation, one state, two systems, and two local governments. Meanwhile, South Korea proposed a 'union of states' model (*gukga yonhap*) composed of one Korean nation, two states, two systems, and two governments, resembling today's European Union," Moon added, clarifying the distinct initial aims of North and South.

Moon contended that the Kim dynasty had long sought reunification based on federation, but having realized its implausibility, Kim Jong Un has officially recognized the inevitability of the two-state formula, long adhered to by the South.

"I would say it is a return to normalcy, albeit with heightened antagonism," Moon concluded.

Offensive or Defensive Move?

By altering the long-standing posture, Moon said, the Kim regime now treats the South as a separate state, which he believes is a defensive move, contrary to many conservative analysts in his country.

"Generally speaking, North Korea's strategy vis-a-vis the South has been framed around the strategy of a 'unified front' (*tongil jeonson junryak*). Central to the strategy is the strengthening of revolutionary capabilities in the South for reunification under communist ideology by cultivating pro-North Korean forces and inciting their domestic uprisings," Moon remarked.

"But the Eighth Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) held in January 2021 amended the preamble of its bylaw and removed its goal of reunifying the South through socialist revolution while setting the new goal of self-reliant and democratic development of North Korean society. Kim's recent emphasis on the two-states approach can be seen as the continuation of this effort," Moon added.

He argued that by dismantling major agencies dealing with the united front strategy, including the United Front Department of the WPK (a superior entity to the Foreign Ministry), the Kim

regime appears to have given up its goal of changing the South Korean system. The Foreign Ministry is expected to handle inter-Korean affairs as the South is now being treated as a sovereign state, which Moon believes represents a “brave new world.”

“The Kim regime is demanding that North Korea be respected as a sovereign country under international law and norms, which prohibit interference in internal affairs such as regime change. The recent move suggests the North will likewise not meddle in South Korea’s domestic affairs and that the South should do the same. This, to me, seems more a defensive, rather than offensive, move,” Moon further elaborated.

Looming “New Continent”

Moscow and Pyongyang’s renewed relationship is another cause for concern. As the war in Ukraine pushes into its third year, the two states are increasingly working as tacit allies, likely trading vital military information and weapons in defiance of United Nations sanctions.

The Diplomat asked what this means for the South moving forward.

“If the cozying of Russia and North Korea continues, it will create two confronting tripartite pacts in Northeast Asia: the northern axis composed of China-Russia-DPRK and the southern one of ROK-US-Japan,” Moon said, expounding that this is tantamount to reverting back to the Cold War era.

“Such a geopolitical configuration will create a ‘new continent’ of opportunity for the North while forcing South Korea to be trapped again in an island of the old Cold War, adding security and diplomatic dilemmas for the South,” Moon added.

North Korea’s Nuclear Conundrum

In December of last year, [Politico reported](#) that if former U.S. President Donald Trump is re-elected, he may provide various incentives to North Korea in exchange for halting its nuclear arms build-up while tolerating its current possession of nuclear weapons.

Former U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton wrote in his [memoir](#) that Trump might attempt a reckless negotiation on the North Korean nuclear issue if re-elected.

The Diplomat asked how Trump’s potential return to the White House could impact denuclearization efforts in the Korean Peninsula.

“I don’t think this view is merely confined to Trump,” Moon argued, suggesting that negotiating with a nuclear-armed North Korea is becoming more widely accepted as a practical approach.

“Basically, we should find ways to halt, roll back, and ultimately dismantle its nuclear weapons and missile capabilities. Although we cannot recognize North Korea as a nuclear weapons state as a signing party to the NPT regime, we should negotiate with it for practical purposes. But this

will pose a major political dilemma since most South Koreans do not want any negotiations with a nuclear North,” Moon said.

Regarding Bolton’s remarks, Moon responded: “Under Moon Jae-in and Trump, we were only one step away from making a significant deal at the Hanoi Summit. The gist of the deal was that if North Korea dismantled the Yongbyon nuclear facilities and some of its hidden enriched uranium programs, the U.S. would ease sanctions quid pro quo. But it is known that officials like Bolton and Mike Pompeo sabotaged the deal by making ‘reckless’ demands of ‘all or nothing.’” The former special advisor closed the interview by suggesting, “Some deals are better than no deals or even big deals.”

Jason Morgan of Reitaku University contributed to this report.