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## Moon Chung-in on Ukraine, the Korean Peninsula, and the US Presidential Election

“In general, there is no public backing for South Korea’s deeper involvement in Ukraine. And this is common sense.”

By [Jason Morgan](#) and [Kenji Yoshida](#)

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It’s a tense moment for the Korean Peninsula. North Korean troops are widely reported to be [massing in Russia](#), presumably to take part in the war against Ukraine. On October 31, Pyongyang conducted its [first ICBM test of 2024](#), reiterating once again that the North “will never change its line of bolstering up its nuclear forces.” And all this comes amid the backdrop of a U.S. presidential election, which creates uncertainty as to Washington’s policies going forward.

In this exclusive interview, we spoke with Dr. Moon Chung-in to explore the implications of North Korean troops in Russia and how the U.S. presidential election may reshape the geopolitical landscape across Europe and Northeast Asia.

Moon is a James Laney Professor Emeritus of Yonsei University, vice chairman of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, and editor-in-chief of Global Asia. He

served as an adviser for three presidents in South Korea and is widely recognized for his expertise in inter-Korea relations and international security.

### **What are your thoughts on the reports of North Korean troops in Russia?**

In South Korea, there is an ongoing debate over the nature of North Korea's involvement. For instance, the Ministry of National Defense states that it's a dispatch of personnel to Russia, while the National Intelligence Service calls it a dispatch of troops. Personnel, of course, could mean an engineering unit or any other supporting staff. Troops, on the other hand, mean actual soldiers being deployed to Russia.

Another debate revolves around whether this could be considered an actual military deployment. This is because North Korean troops currently training in areas like Khabarovsk or Vladivostok are wearing Russian military uniforms and are under the Russian rubric. If that's the case, it would be more accurate to call them mercenaries like the Wagner forces.

Ultimately, we will have to wait and see if North Korean soldiers appear in battle zones like Kursk or Donbas and what their mission would entail.

### **Does this change Russia's battlefield strategy?**

President Vladimir Putin has made it clear that the North Korean troops' engagement would be more symbolic than strategic. First, there is a linguistic barrier. Second, the weapons systems used in the two countries are different. Lastly, even the doctrinal orientation of the two militaries diverges. It is, therefore, very tough for the North Korean military to be integrated into the Russian system. Significance on the battlefield seems minimal to me.

### **Will South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol respond by supplying lethal weapons to Ukraine?**

President Yoon has taken an assertive position in response to reports of North Korea's military engagement in Russia. But, in reality, Yoon has limited options. He's barred from transferring lethal weapons to countries in conflict, namely Ukraine, as the law prohibits such actions. The Yoon administration can certainly seek approval from the National Assembly, but with the opposition party holding the majority of seats, it would be incredibly difficult.

The opposition does not want South Korea to be entangled in the Ukraine war.

When it comes to the potential deployment of our troops, approval from the legislative branch is also required. But this would be virtually impossible.

Yoon can take a rhetorical stance, but when implementing his commitment, he will encounter formidable challenges at home.

### **How does the South Korean public perceive the current situation?**

Just yesterday [on October 25], one opinion poll showed almost 80 percent of the respondents opposed the transfer of lethal weapons to Ukraine. But on humanitarian aid, some 65 percent supported it.

In general, though, there is no public backing for South Korea's deeper involvement in Ukraine. And this is common sense. Even in a hypothetical crisis over the Taiwan Strait, should South Korea extend military assistance to Taiwan, the U.S., and Japan? Over 60 percent of South Koreans say no. We should take a neutral position. I believe logistical support is possible, but military involvement will be subject to intense domestic political debates.

There is also fear that South Korea's growing support of Ukraine could, in turn, trigger serious boomerang effects such as Moscow's military support of Pyongyang, including the transfer of critical military technologies related to ICBM re-entry, hyper-supersonic missiles, military satellites, upgrading of nuclear weapons, and nuclear submarines. There will be serious negative consequences on the Korean Peninsula should this happen. Many South Koreans, therefore, call for a more prudent and cautious approach.

### **Do closer North Korea-Russia relations indicate a waning influence of China over North Korea?**

China does not want to see the revival of the old Cold War structure in Northeast Asia and to be treated as a rogue state like North Korea and Russia. They also do not wish tensions to rise on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. With the U.S. presidential election approaching, leaders in Beijing will need to show that they are on good behavior to continue constructive dialogue with the new U.S. president.

And that is precisely why Pyongyang distrusted China and made a full bet on Russia. So, it's natural that China's influence over North Korea is now limited.

## **How might the outcome of the U.S. presidential election affect global conflicts?**

If Donald Trump gets re-elected, there might be a big change in Europe. Trump once stated that he would end the war in Ukraine in a week if he gets re-elected. He is also proud of his personal ties with Putin. So, he may work out a magic formula to end the war in Ukraine, even though I doubt it. If Kamala Harris gets elected, the Ukraine situation is likely to continue.

The conflict in the Middle East will persist, regardless of who ends up in the White House. As for Northeast Asia, there will also be no significant change. Both Harris and Trump will likely carry on the bipartisan policy of encircling and containing China.

## **What about U.S. policies vis-a-vis North Korea?**

Trump would be more accommodating to Kim Jong Un, whereas Harris will probably continue the Obama-Biden policy of strategic patience. But even if Trump comes up with a more amenable policy towards North Korea, I'm not sure if Kim will be receptive this time around. Since the Hanoi setback in February 2019, Kim's distrust of, and dissatisfaction with, Trump seems to be very high.

In fact, Kim is making a full shift from his grandfather and father's policy toward the U.S., which was aimed to secure regime security and boost economic development by normalizing diplomatic ties with the United States. The U.S. was then the "alpha and omega" of North Korea's foreign policy. Now, Kim is saying, "Forget about the U.S. We found a new partner called Russia."

With this profound paradigm shift, I cannot be sure to what extent Kim is willing to accommodate Trump's wishes for a dialogue and engagement. Even if Trump comes up with concrete incentives palatable to North Korea, Kim knows that the bureaucrats and politicians in Washington could easily obstruct them. Trump might seek to leverage Russia to bring Kim back to the negotiating table. The issue is whether Washington politics would tolerate Trump's Putin connection and leverage.

## **Is a nuclear North Korea a new reality?**

Regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons, we need to make a distinction between recognition and awareness. We can never recognize the country as a nuclear weapons state since we must comply with the NPT [Non-

Proliferation Treaty]. But we need to be aware of North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons. That is a naked reality that we cannot deny.

In this sense, the idea of CVID (complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement) seems unrealistic. As Dr. Sigfried Hecker has been suggesting, our operational goal should be more practical, like "halting, rolling back, and a long-term, incremental dismantling" of North Korea's nuclear weapons programs. Placing denuclearization at the entrance will be a non-starter.

It seems essential to lower expectations and restore cognitive empathy toward North Korea. For instance, in April 2018, Pyongyang voluntarily put a moratorium on nuclear and ballistic missile testing and didn't undertake any tests until 2020. Instead of rewarding North Korea for this "good" behavior, the Trump administration imposed over 40 additional sanction measures on the North. The logic behind this was that two summits were sufficient rewards for Kim Jong Un. That's bad, unilateral reasoning without any strategic empathy. North Korea should have felt bitter and betrayed.

If a sanction is a tool to change North Korea's behavior, it should be more flexibly utilized. Of course, I understand that all sanctions are codified and legally binding. However, the U.S. should have devised ways to loosen that rigidity and used sanctions as flexible bargaining chips.

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