

This interview of PCI Board Member, Dr. Chung-in Moon, appeared in the Korea Times on Thursday, May 9, 2024.

## INTERVIEW 'Trump's possible return will be mixed bag for South Korea'

Posted : 2024-05-09 15:57

Updated : 2024-05-09 18:09



Moon Chung-in, professor emeritus at Yonsei University and former special adviser for foreign affairs and national security during the previous Moon Jae-in government, speaks during an interview with The Korea Times at the newspaper's office in Seoul, Tuesday. Korea Times photo by Shim Hyun-chul

### **Former security adviser expects Trump to visit Pyongyang to leave political legacy**

By Lee Hyo-jin

The U.S. presidential election is six months away. U.S. allies worldwide, including South Korea, are closely monitoring the race, which appears to be a tight contest between the incumbent President Joe Biden and his predecessor Donald Trump.

The potential return of Trump, who perceives many U.S. allies as "free-riding" on its military power, adds an extra layer of concern for South Korea. In particular, given the Yoon Suk Yeol administration's focus on strengthening its alliance with Washington and

extended deterrence against North Korean threats, the return of Trump could force South Korea to recalibrate its diplomatic strategies.

In light of these pressing issues, The Korea Times sat down with Moon Chung-in, former special adviser for foreign affairs and national security during the previous Moon Jae-in government, Tuesday, to discuss the implications of the U.S. presidential election and foreign policy of the Yoon administration.

Below are excerpts from the interview. It has been edited for brevity and clarity.



Then-U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un talk during a meeting in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in Panmunjeom in Paju, Gyeonggi Province in this June 30, 2019 photo. Joint Press Corps.

**Q: If Trump were to be re-elected, what would his approach be toward North Korea? Would we witness another Trump-Kim bromance?**

A: In a potential second term, Trump will prioritize solidifying his political legacy. His foreign policies would be greatly influenced by media attention and personal ego, as he values how history will remember him. Striking a "big deal" with Pyongyang and contributing to peace on the Korean Peninsula could serve as a pathway to fulfilling such an ambition, potentially earning him a Nobel Peace Prize nomination. While resolving the war in Ukraine or the Gaza crisis could

also enhance his Nobel Prize prospects, negotiations with North Korea are likely to be a key agenda for Trump.

In that sense, Trump will actively engage North Korea, potentially even considering a visit to Pyongyang for a summit with Kim Jong-un, where Trump could present surprising offers. However, the success of such endeavors ultimately depends on Kim's response.

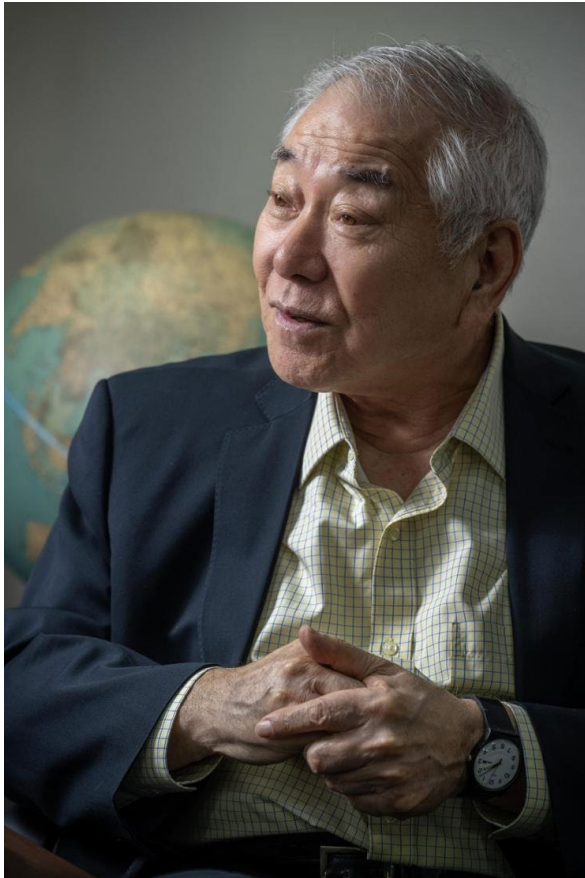
**Q: What would Kim want from Trump? And considering that their previous attempts did not yield favorable results, does that mean they will have to start from square one?**

A: Kim has little to lose by fostering a close relationship with Trump, as showcasing friendship with a global leader sends a powerful message both domestically and internationally.

However, the problem is that Kim's trust in Trump was shattered when the former president did not keep his promise made during the Panmunjeom summit in June 2019. To mend that fractured trust, Trump would need to extend significant overtures this time. This could include pledges on immediate sanctions relief that would visibly improve North Korea's economy, followed by the normalization of bilateral relations between Pyongyang and Washington. Additionally, Trump might propose halting joint military exercises between South Korea and the United States, or even reducing the number of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) troops. In exchange, he could seek commitments from North Korea to cease nuclear and missile activities, along with a gradual reduction of its nuclear arsenal.

**Q: There are concerns here that the potential return of Trump could result in a weakened South Korea-U.S. alliance. Would his return be a curse or a blessing for South Korea?**

A: It would be both. It could prove to be a curse for the conservatives in Seoul, while progressives might see it as a chance for blessing. For conservatives, there are concerns that Trump could use the presence of USFK as a bargaining chip in negotiations over a defense cost-sharing deal. Such a move could potentially weaken the longstanding South Korea-U.S. alliance. Also, under Trump, there's a significant possibility of decreased trilateral cooperation between Seoul, Washington and Tokyo, along with a weakened U.S. security commitment to South Korea. This scenario could create a power vacuum on the Korean Peninsula, heightening the risks of war in the region.



Moon Chung-in, professor emeritus at Yonsei University and former special adviser for foreign affairs and national security during the previous Moon Jae-in government, speaks during an interview with The Korea Times at the newspaper's office in Seoul, Tuesday. Korea Times photo by Shim Hyun-chul

On the other hand, progressives could leverage Trump's eagerness to engage North Korea, if they play their cards right. His desire to establish a political legacy might open the door to unexpected breakthroughs in inter-Korean relations. Trump's potential initiatives, such as pursuing a reduction of USFK forces and halting the deployment of U.S. strategic assets, could become useful cards for progressives in agendas such as an end-of-war declaration. This could potentially pave the way for them to form a new security architecture in the North Asian region led by South Korea.

**Q. There is a lot of talk about the scenario of Trump's re-election. But what if Biden wins the race? Do you think he might readjust North Korea policies?**

A. I don't foresee any significant changes coming from Team Biden. His security advisers maintain a traditional approach toward North Korea, focusing on status-quo management. Their aim is to avoid provoking Pyongyang, while also refraining from pursuing major diplomatic negotiations. So their strategy involves maintaining deterrence, while keeping the door open for dialogue.

However, in response to criticism that the Biden administration has placed the North Korean issue on the back burner, some U.S. officials have recently floated the idea of so-called "interim steps" to revive dialogue with the North. But this suggestion was apparently rejected by the South Korean government. Nevertheless, if Biden secures another term, this agenda may be pushed further by his administration. But it would still be difficult to get a positive response from the North, especially considering the virtual absence of direct communication channels between Washington and Pyongyang. There may be a need for assistance from either Russia or China, but the likelihood of this is very low.

**Q. How would you evaluate the Yoon Suk Yeol administration's North Korea policies? How about the Biden administration?**

A. The Yoon government views North Korea as a weak nation, even though it possesses nuclear weapons, and sees it as a regime on the brink of collapse. Consequently, they believe that applying maximum pressure — both militarily and economically — would compel North Korea to either surrender or collapse.

However, such a belief is flawed. There is no reason to anticipate North Korea's immediate collapse. The ineffectiveness of economic sanctions have been proven. North Korea's economy, thanks to support from China and Russia, is not as weak as we think. Specifically, we should consider the strengthening partnership between North Korea and Russia. For Russia, providing food and energy to support 20 million North Koreans is a relatively minor effort.



President Yoon Suk Yeol and his U.S. counterpart Joe Biden shake hands during a joint press conference at the White House in Washington, April 26, 2023. EPA-Yonhap

**Q. What do you think about the deterrence strategy employed by South Korea and the U.S.? Has it proven to be effective?**

A. The deterrence strategy employed by South Korea and the U.S., ostensibly aimed at altering North Korea's behavior, has instead provoked further aggression from the North, escalating the risk of war.

The U.S. treatment of China, North Korea, Russia, and Iran as an axis of evil has solidified their relationships on the contrary. Such development will help North Korea find ways to survive more easily. For example, crises in Ukraine or the Middle East could unexpectedly provide North Korea with a lifeline.

In that sense, the current North Korea policies adopted by the government are not achieving anything; they are only making things worse. I believe the South Korean government should consider various aspects of the rapidly changing international environment, where its policies may not always be effective.

**Q. Let's talk about another important neighbor of South Korea — Russia. Diplomatic relations with Russia remain tense. Moscow has warned Seoul not to cross certain redlines. What do you think these redlines are?**

A. From Russia's perspective, providing lethal weapons to Ukraine would certainly cross the red line. If South Korea were to do so, it would be considered an enemy state by Russia.

Additionally, with President Vladimir Putin expected to visit Pyongyang soon, any interference regarding Moscow's partnership with North Korea would also be viewed unfavorably. Russia's official stance is clear: exchanges with North Korea should focus on providing daily necessities

and support for the energy sector, not transferring technology that could threaten South Korea's security. Russia is also concerned about Seoul's unilateral and multilateral sanctions.

**Q. What about China? Do you believe that an upcoming trilateral summit between South Korea, China and Japan can serve as a breakthrough in strained Seoul-Beijing ties?**

A. China has two explicit redlines. One is the Taiwan issue, and the other trilateral military cooperation with Japan and the US that threatens China's core interests. The trilateral summit is likely to take place soon, but it's doubtful that China would see significant benefits from the trilateral talks. Instead, it may perceive South Korea and Japan as forming a united front against it. For instance, discussions on environmental issues might involve China's discontent about Japan's release of wastewater from Fukushima, which South Korea has found little problem with. In the economic security realm, both South Korea and Japan have joined the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), a U.S.-led initiative that excludes China from the global supply chain. Regarding people-to-people exchanges, the scale of interaction between South Korea and Japan is much larger than that between Seoul and Beijing or Tokyo and Beijing.