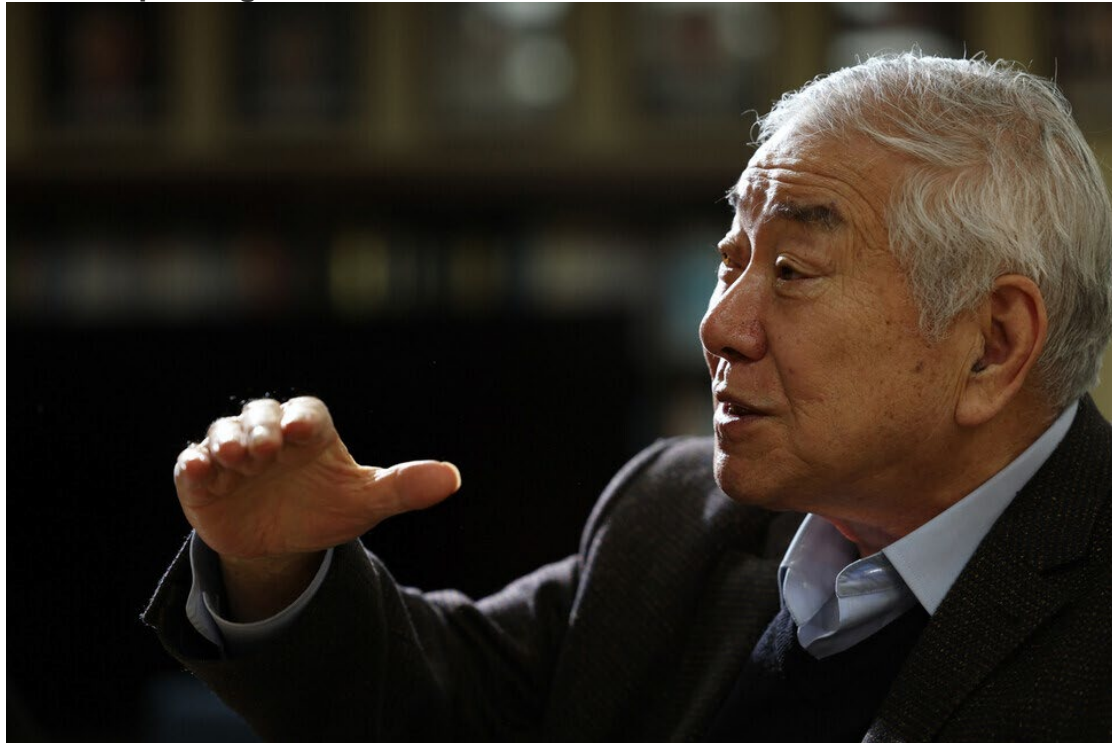


[Interview] Accidental clash on Korean Peninsula could touch off nuclear war, warns Moon Chung-in

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The Yonsei University professor emeritus said in an interview with the Hankyoreh that an accidental clash between North and South Korea at the current moment runs the risk of expanding into a nuclear war



Yonsei University Professor Emeritus Moon Chung-in speaks to the Hankyoreh at the Kim Dae-jung Presidential Library and Museum in Seoul's Mapo District on Jan. 16. (Kang Chang-kwang/The Hankyoreh)

The Korean Peninsula is in a period of great political unrest. US experts on North Korea have called the current moment the greatest crisis on the Korean Peninsula since the outbreak of the Korean War. The South Korean public's concerns about war breaking out are growing by the day.

Despite these circumstances, the leaders of both Koreas are continuing to engage in a dangerous game of chicken. They are bombarding each other with charged words that claim they shall not be the instigators of war while saying they shall not shy away from the possibility of it, as well as carrying out shows of force.

Meanwhile elsewhere in the region, Taiwan's choice of Democratic Progressive Party candidate Lai Ching-te to be its next president has focused the world's attention on cross-strait relations as well as US-China relations, particularly with regard to how Lai's inauguration could affect the current situation in East Asia.

Moreover, there appears to be a growing likelihood that Donald Trump, known in Korea as the “rogue rugby ball” for his unpredictability, will be reelected to the White House in the US presidential election this November.

The Hankyoreh sat down with Professor Emeritus Moon Chung-in of Yonsei University, a scholar of international relations and the Korean Peninsula, to discuss these recent developments. While assessing that the possibility of either Korea preparing for a real war to be minimal, Moon expressed concern over the possibility of an accidental clash leading to not just a conventional war, but a nuclear one.

The well-known foreign policy expert emphasized that the two Koreas should tone down the belligerent rhetoric and that the administration of President Yoon Suk-yeol in the South should focus on preventive diplomacy.

Our interview with Moon, who also serves as the chairman of the Hankyoreh Foundation for Reunification and Culture, took place at the Yonsei Institute for North Korean Studies, located in the Kim Dae-jung Presidential Library and Museum in Seoul.

Hankyoreh: Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party has become the president-elect of Taiwan. How will this impact cross-strait relations, US-China relations, and the current situation in East Asia?

Moon: I believe the status quo will remain in place. US President Joe Biden made it clear that the US does not support Taiwanese independence as soon as Lai was elected, and Trump, who is currently the frontrunner for the Republican nomination, has also suggested that the US would not protect Taiwan in the case of an invasion by China.

This suggests that the US has no intention of heightening tensions in cross-strait relations by egging Taiwan on to seek independence. Also, Lai utilized the cross-strait relations problem to the maximum during his election campaign, so we can infer that he will be inclined to stabilize the situation from now on.

US-China relations have become relatively more stable since the summit in San Francisco last November, as well as since military leaders of the two countries have opened more channels of communication, it seems unlikely that a military conflict that would disrupt the status quo in the Taiwan Strait or the South China will occur.

Hankyoreh: There is the possibility that the Taiwan presidential election could put added pressure on South Korea-China relations. What do you think the Yoon administration should focus on to manage and fix South Korea-China relations?

Moon: Indeed, the results of the election could put added pressure on South Korea-China relations. One thing to feel hopeful about is that Cho Tae-yul, the newly inaugurated foreign minister, has voiced his willingness to strengthen not only Seoul’s relationship with Washington, but also its relationship with Beijing.

If such statements are followed up with action, we could see a change in attitude from China. However, one variable in this situation is inter-Korean relations. At a moment in which inter-Korean relations are stagnant and sour like they are currently, if the South Korea-US alliance and

trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the US and Japan are bolstered to tackle North Korean threats, China may begin to wonder if they're the one in the crosshairs.

Hankyoreh: Inter-Korean relations have been heading into rocky territory from the very start of the new year. Why do you think that North Korea has redefined its relationship with South Korea from a reunification-oriented “special interim relationship” to a relation “between two states hostile to each other”?

Moon:The emphasis seems to lie in normalizing relations between the two Koreas from one based on ethnicity or national identity to one between two states. The ironic thing here is that normalizing inter-Korean relations was one of the agendas the Yoon administration ran on, but North Korea beat it to the punch. Conservatives in South Korea have long been pushing to get rid of the Ministry Of Unification by absorbing it into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, showing that they have long considered inter-Korean relations to be those between two separate states.

It is surprising to see Kim Jong-un be so proactive and making bold steps in that direction. From Kim's point of view, defining relations between the two Koreas as a “reunification-oriented special interim relationship” does nothing to benefit him, and only heightens the risk of unification by absorption.

Defining the two countries as a relation between “two states hostile to each other” seems to be based on this assessment of the status quo; a reflexive act aimed at solidifying internal cohesion.

Hankyoreh:Kim Yo-jong, the vice department director of the WPK Central Committee, released a statement earlier this month in which she described former President Moon Jae-in as “sagacious and crafty” and criticized the discrepancies between his actions and his words. As someone who was formerly the special presidential adviser for unification, foreign affairs and national security during the Moon administration, how do you interpret this assessment?

Moon:It's not hard to see why North Korea would feel disgruntled by the fact that, even after it vowed to denuclearize and seek peace in front of an audience of 150,000 people at the Rungrado 1st of May Stadium after adopting the Panmunjom and Pyongyang Declarations with South Korea, South Korea failed to make good on its part of the deal.

Agreements such as those for restarting tourism to Mount Kumgang in the North and reopening the industrial complex in Kaesong were never carried to fruition, not to mention the fact that South Korea never ended up sending its promised shipments of Tamiflu to the North.

At the time, with the second US-North Korea summit on the horizon, the Moon administration most likely thought that cooperation between South Korea and the US could hit a bump if inter-Korean relations moved too quickly without it.

Moreover, accepting South Korea's proposal and including the clause, “The North expressed its willingness to continue to take additional measures, such as the permanent dismantlement of the nuclear facilities in Yeongbyeon, as the United States takes corresponding measures in accordance with the spirit of the June 12 US-DPRK Joint Statement,” in the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018 was truly a landmark move on the part of North Korea.

The biggest challenge for the Moon administration, which had sought to find a breakthrough in

the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the establishment of a peace regime through the Hanoi summit in February 2019, was to work on extended consultations to convince the US. In doing so, it may have lost momentum in improving inter-Korean relations by trying to heed the needs of the Trump administration. In retrospect, that was a major failure.



Yonsei University Professor Emeritus Moon Chung-in speaks to the Hankyoreh at the Kim Dae-jung Presidential Library and Museum in Seoul's Mapo District on Jan. 16. (Kang Chang-kwang/The Hankyoreh)

Hankyoreh: We're hearing more and more talk about the Korean Peninsula being on the brink of war lately. Two renowned US scholars on North Korea, Robert Carlin and Siegfried Hecker, who are both affiliated with the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, recently published an article claiming that North Korea has "made a strategic decision to go to war." What is your opinion on such claims?

Moon: These statements are talking about premeditated attempts to launch a war on the Korean Peninsula on a scale similar to the Korean War, but Kim's statements are actually conditional. He's essentially saying, "If we 'have' to go to war, we will not shy away from it. We will use all of our weapons, including our nuclear arsenal, to defeat the South and reclaim the land for our regime."

If we look at those words from a different angle, it means that the North will not be the ones to instigate war. However, the Yoon administration is repeating the same sentiment: "If North Korea provokes us, we will be swift, forceful, and definitive in our response, leading to the end of the North Korean regime."

This is another conditional statement. In other words, both sides believe that there will be no premeditated preemptive strikes.

Hankyoreh: What are the chances of an intended armed clash or an escalation in conflict?

Moon:That's what worries me. An unintended clash has the potential to erupt into a regional war, a full-scale war, or even a nuclear war. Right now, tensions around the Northern Limit Line (NLL) are ratcheting up again. Kim Jong-un recently declared he will not acknowledge the NLL, and that he'll consider even an intrusion of 0.001 millimeters into his territory as an act of war. The more threats he makes, the more forcefully our government will respond to defend the NLL. Additionally, if people on our side start launching anti-North propaganda balloons once the winds turn in their favor, then the chances of an armed clash escalate even further. If a clash does occur, the North's verbal threats will mesh with the Yoon administration's aggressive rules of engagement to create the conditions for a full-scale conflict.

If the South Korean and US military offer a joint response to the North's threats, the sheer firepower of the combined forces will be much greater than North Korea's, and Pyongyang will view such a move as an existential threat to their regime and country. Opposing the destruction of their country is their second stated condition for the use of strategic nuclear weapons.

Hankyoreh: The US has jurisdiction over the UN Command and the ROK/US Combined Forces Command. Wouldn't they be able to prevent an expansion of the conflict?

Moon:That may be the case, but if South and North Korea engage militarily under the claim of self-defense, the amount of military force used may drastically increase in a short period of time. At that point, it would be difficult for the US to prevent a full-scale war.

Moreover, when unintended skirmishes occurred in the past, inter-Korean communication channels still operated to prevent further escalation, but those channels are currently blocked off. Increased chances of miscommunication or misunderstanding increase the chances of an armed clash. It's as clear as day. Civilian inter-Korean exchange is also at a standstill, and the chances of the US or China intervening to calm things down look slim. This is seriously worrisome.

Hankyoreh: Some are calling for negotiations that simply call for a limit to the arms race, rather than calling for the complete denuclearization of North Korea.

Moon:Those in that camp basically say that North Korea already has nuclear weapons, so we may as well face the music of that situation. They say that if we begin negotiations under the condition that North Korea must denuclearize, then Pyongyang will never come to the table. Therefore, they say, the more important strategic goal is to limit Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal, rather than trying to eliminate it.

Honestly, those people have a point. Dr. Siegfried Hecker argues that we should focus on stopping the increase in the North's nuclear weapons, and on gradually diminishing their current arsenal, with the long-term goal of complete elimination. This could be a practical blueprint. We could begin negotiations to limit and eventually reduce the North's nuclear arsenal under the condition that Pyongyang can normalize relations with Washington. That could prevent further escalation in a realistic fashion. Naturally, North Korea would have to offer some concessions in exchange for normalizing relations with the US.

Hankyoreh: If Trump is elected US president in November, how would that impact the Korean Peninsula and East Asia?

Moon: Trump certainly believes in his powers of negotiation. Seeing as he continues to present a friendly stance to Kim, an immediate dialogue between Trump and Kim could happen if the former were elected. In that case, the Yoon administration would find itself in a bind. The US-South Korea alliance could also take a hit. Trump has very clear boundaries about what he considers one-way alliances in which the US gives without getting anything in return, meaning he would once again demand an increase in South Korea's defense spending.

Trump would try to avoid being mentioned in connection with a war on the Korean Peninsula, meaning he might demand South Korea increase its financial contributions to joint training exercises and the deployment of US strategic assets on Korean soil. The recently adopted Washington Declaration pledging enhanced extended deterrence, as well as the trilateral cooperation that includes Japan, could also take a hit. Since the Yoon administration has basically placed all its eggs in the US alliance basket, all of that would pose serious problems for Yoon.

Hankyoreh: What's one thing you hope the Yoon administration keeps in mind?

Moon: War must be avoided at all costs. I hope the administration focuses its diplomatic and national security resources not on winning a war but on avoiding one. The safety and livelihood of the people are the president and the government's top priority. They need to remember their duty to protect the people's property, and that the country belongs to the people in a democratic society.

There's something I really want to say to both the Yoon administration and Kim Jong-un in North Korea: Both North and South Korea need to exercise restraint, and be cautious. If dialogue is not on the table, then the next best option is restraint. We need to begin the process of rebuilding trust by toning down or suspending military exercises on both sides of the border, by reconnecting communication lines, and by resuming inter-Korean dialogue. It's also essential to restore the Sept. 19 inter-Korean military agreement. These measures would provide a launchpad for rebuilding foreign policy centered on preventing conflict.

By Cheong Wook-sik, director of the Hankyoreh Peace Institute and director of the Peace Network

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