

Instead of Military Exercises, the Door to Talks Should be Opened Through Providing Food Aid to the North

'Speculation about a March Crises' on the Korean Peninsula emerges as international diplomacy hits an impasse

By Kang T'ae-ho
Reporter

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William H. Overholt, senior research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School (left), and Donald P. Gregg, former U.S. ambassador to South Korea (center), discussed the current situation on the Korean peninsula with Yonsei University professor Moon Chung-in on February 25 in Los Angeles (local time). Los Angeles/Reporter Kang T'ae-ho

The current situation on the Korean peninsula is very worrisome. The energy that emerged from what seemed like meaningful talks during the U.S.-China summit held in January has stalled and some people are even beginning to talk about a March crisis on the Korean peninsula. Taking an opportunity afforded by their joint participation in the annual meeting of the Los Angeles-based Pacific Century Institute, Yonsei university professor Moon Chung-in sat down with Donald P. Gregg, a former U.S. ambassador to South Korea, and William H. Overholt, a senior research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy

School, to ask them for their views on how the U.S. and China and North and South Korea might overcome the challenges they are facing at present. This discussion took place in a restaurant in Los Angeles over a period of about an hour and a half on the afternoon of January 25 (local time).



Yonsei University Professor Moon Chung-in

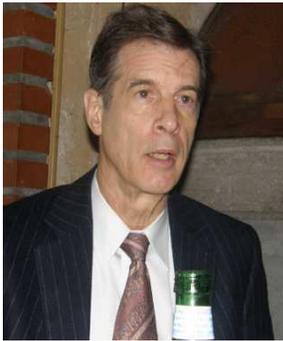
Moon Chung-in is an expert on North-South issues who served as a special delegate for the North-South summit meetings held in 2000 and 2007. After completing his undergraduate studies at Yonsei University, he went to the U.S. to do graduate study at the University of Maryland where he received an M.A. and Ph.D. in political science. While currently a professor at Yonsei University, previously he has held several official positions including chairman of the Presidential Committee for the Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative, ambassador for international security affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and member of the advisory board on national defense development. As these positions indicate, he has been engaged in a wide variety of activities including not just North-South issues but also the entire spectrum of issues ranging from the politics and economy of East Asia to international politics, diplomacy and security. Moon also is an expert on Islam and the politics of the Middle East. Fluent in English, he has taught in the United States at the University of Kentucky, Williams College and Duke University and while residing there also served as vice president of the International Studies Association of North America. As a regular participant in the Davos Forum and most other major international meetings of experts, Moon is one of the political scientists who represent South Korea through a wide array of exchanges with counterparts in the United States as well as elsewhere in the world. He is widely known both in South Korea and internationally, not only for his extensive publishing activities, which include some 200 articles and around 40 authored or edited book, but also for what he contributes through his numerous interviews with the media in which he constantly addresses current diplomatic and security issues. Last year, Moon received a favorable review for a piece he wrote based on interviews with experts playing a core role in China's policy decision-making process that was titled "Asking about China's Tomorrow" in which China's strategy as an emerging Great Power is explained from the Chinese perspective.



Former U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Donald P. Gregg

From his assignment in the early 1970s as station chief for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, through his service as U.S. ambassador from 1989 to 1993, and continuing right up until his resignation as chairman of The Korea Society in 2009, during nearly 40 years extending from the time of President Park Chong Hee through the current administration of President Lee Myung-bak, Donald P. Gregg was deeply involved in the policy-making process and a witness to all of the dramatic moments in the contemporary history of the Korean peninsula,

including U.S.–North Korea relations. In name and in reality, he is the number one expert and advisor on the issues of the Korean peninsula. Moreover, Gregg participated directly in the policy decision-making process during his service in the White House over a period of about 10 years, first in the capacity of a staff member of the National Security Council during the administration of former president Jimmy Carter and later as national security advisor to the then vice president George H. W. Bush during the administration of former president Ronald Reagan. Gregg has borne the brunt of backlash from the Lee Myung-bak administration for pointing out that the international community does not fully concur with the ROK government’s findings that the DPRK was responsible for the sinking of the Cheonan in an Op Ed that he contributed to the New York Times-owned International Herald Tribune on August 31 of last year.



Harvard Kennedy School Senior Research Fellow William H. Overholt

Following the completion of his undergraduate studies at Harvard, William H. Overholt did graduate work at Yale university where he received an M.A. and Ph.D. Highly regarded as an expert on issues related to China and Asia in general, in his position as a senior fellow at the Kennedy School, Overholt has conducted research on contemporary China and published some of the earliest contributions to the discussion of how China together with the United States contributes to maintaining world order, including *China and Globalization* and *The Rise of China: How Economic Reform is Creating a New Superpower*. In his book, *The Rise of China*, which was published in 1993, Overholt proposed that the U.S. adopt a friendly and circumspect approach toward China while opening up the discussion of China as already playing a leading role in world affairs along with the U.S. After stabling a relationship with the Democratic Party by serving as an advisor in the election campaign at the time of Jimmy Carter, he served as an advisor on foreign policy in the Bill Clinton administration in the 1990s. In addition to his position as a senior research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School, in the early 2000s he was a visiting fellow at Korea Development Institute and he also established several other ties with South Korea through his advisory role in the National Defense University Graduate School.

Regarding preparations for ‘possible additional provocations by North Korea’

William H. Overholt: “Send a signal of a hard-line response but follow up with a soft-line policy”

Donald P. Gregg: “Exercise military restraint through playing the food aid card”

Why are the U.S. and China at odds with each other on policy toward the Korean peninsula?

Moon Chung-in: “The U.S. is only on South Korea’s side so multilateral diplomacy is being neglected.”

Donald P. Gregg: “There’s a difference of perception on the threat posed by North Korea’s collapse and the danger of its nuclear programs.”

Moon Chung-in (hereinafter: Moon): Speculation has emerged about a ‘March Crises on the Korean Peninsula’. North–South talks have broken down. Following reports about signs of an impending nuclear test by North Korea and the recent completion of a missile test launching facility, the U.S. and South Korea began large-scale joint military exercises, including the Key Resolve/Foal Eagle exercise. North Korea has pushed back on these exercises, and there is a possibility that these exercises may even be used as justification for additional provocations. There is greater concern than last year about the potential for a serious confrontation.

William H. Overholt (hereinafter: Overholt): A very clear signal must be sent that there will be a strong response to any additional provocation by North Korea. At the same time that signal is being sent, in the interest of warding off danger, opportunities also must be provided for North Korea to adopt more constructive and desirable measures.

Donald P. Gregg (hereinafter: Gregg): You always need to be very cautious about questions premised on hypothetical situations, but first of all it is necessary to convey clearly through the regular military communication channels the point that these are just routine military exercises. Going into the month of March, from the North Korean perspective, the shortage of food may well become a much more serious issue. From this perspective, a desirable way of dealing with any expected dangerous situation would be to focus on the issue of providing food aid as a means of restraining a military response from North Korea. It is necessary to make North Korea understand that the potential for obtaining food aid is great if it is able to restrain itself militarily. Accordingly, the desirable approach is to lean in the direction of showing a lot of interest in the problem of a food shortage rather than focusing on the military issue as a way of enhancing the prospects for holding talks during the month of March. Last December, North Korea restrained itself and did not respond with a further provocation in response to South Korea’s resumption of its live fire exercise on Yŏnpy’ŏng Island. It is hoped that the same stance will be taken in response to the current U.S.–South Korea military exercise. As the stance adopted by North Korea on that occasion suggests, providing North Korea with the food aid it wants could be a positive measure to induce the more active commitment to building a relationship that both the U.S. and South Korea are seeking.

Moon: When the U.S. and China held a summit meeting in mid-January, they agreed in the joint statement that the two countries would cooperate to launch a new era. However, doesn’t it now seem that the agreement reached at the summit has hit a wall with respect to the peace and security of the Korean peninsula? This is indicated by the contrast in the way the U.S. and China have been responding to the critical situation on the Korean peninsula. Stressing peace and security, China has tried to block an increase in tensions by emphasizing the need for both the North and the South to engage in dialogue and to exercise self-restraint. If you look at the situation from China’s perspective, however, the U.S. has attached more importance to maintaining its alliance relationship with South

Korea than to promoting the peace and security of the Korean peninsula. In particular, the U.S. has been taken South Korea's side excessively, both generally and especially with regard to the Ch'ŏnan incident and the shelling of Yŏnp'yŏng Island.

Overholt: It is not appropriate to say that South Korea has to restrain itself. That's because South Korea already has restrained itself. It is easy for China to speak in such relative terms. Instead of calling for both sides to restrain themselves after an attack by North Korea, the appropriate diplomatic response is not to acknowledge the provocation.

Moon: Last year, China expressed a strong objection to the participation of a U.S. aircraft carrier in the U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises in the West Sea. What is China's response likely to be when a U.S. aircraft carrier participates in the U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises this year? It is not just a North-South issue. Rather, isn't it the case that tension also can arise between the U.S. and China?

Gregg: I will pass on answering that kind of hypothetical question. One of the things I learned from the elder President Bush is that you stay out of trouble by not answering leading questions. But, of course, there are good reasons why it is difficult for the U.S. and China to cooperate in resolving the problems of the Korean peninsula. North Korea's nuclear weapons programs pose a serious threat to the U.S. and South Korea, but they are not a threat to China. On the other hand, when the U.S. and South Korea adopt a tough policy toward North Korea—for example, regime change or reunification by absorption—China responds with great sensitivity to what it perceives as a threat to its own security. There is a fundamental difference of perspective between China and the U.S. or South Korea in terms of their perception of the threat posed by the collapse of North Korea as opposed to the threat posed simply by the continuing existence of North Korea.

Moon: What do you think about the implication one might draw that 'superpowers' like the U.S. and China are being controlled by the two Koreas in dealing with the issues of the Korean peninsula? One American expert has characterized the situation as China being blackmailed by North Korea and metaphorically alluded to a "tail wagging the dog" relationship while another expert has said that the U.S.'s North Korea policy has been "high jacked" by South Korea.

Overholt: I don't agree. What North Korea is seeking is the security of its system. On this assumption, whatever the U.S., China or the North and South themselves might want to exchange with each other even if it is something necessary, the problem is that it can not ensure the continuing existence of the system. It is true that information about North Korea is increasing due to expanding exchanges and contacts with the country. Nevertheless, there is no reliable information and no one knows when there will be a change of regime. However, it is clear that North Korea is in dire straits due to economic and other domestic problems. Despite this situation, China is flinching from dealing squarely with this fundamental crisis. This is because an intervention into North Korea's internal affairs would give rise to tensions and conflicts. China also is avoiding a discussion of this problem with the United States. Furthermore, I think there are

differences of opinion on the subject and that's another reason China does not want to get deeply involved in a discussion of the internal affairs of North Korea.

Gregg: The problem is not just that all of the parties, the United States, China, South Korea and Japan, do not show any desire to get a proper understanding of North Korea's internal affairs, but there also is no way to understand them accurately. It is already a widely accepted fact that U.S. intelligence has failed to penetrate the internal affairs of North Korea ever since the establishment of the regime. However, now one thing is clear. That is, within three months, North Korea will be facing a very severe shortage of food. In the multilateral approach to dealing with North Korea's food shortage, in the future, the issue may become the starting point of all diplomatic and security issues.

Moon: Well, then, why isn't the Obama administration going in that direction? The U.S. is continuing to talk about a policy of strategic patience. Isn't this policy actually strengthening North Korea's hand and making it a greater threat to the U.S.? The level of the danger posed by North Korea increased with the second nuclear test, the missile launches and the revelation about the nuclear enrichment facility. The situation has deteriorated. Nevertheless, as a result of adhering resolutely to the position that there should be no reward for bad behavior, the U.S. has given up any efforts to positively engage North Korea in talks, and instead has just been waiting for North Korea to change. So, to put it bluntly, whose side is time on in this situation?

Overholt: From the perspective of economic security, the living conditions of the people, the attributes of the political system and other such factors, it is impossible to say that time is on North Korea's side.

Gregg: The question of whose side time is on is like comparing apples and oranges. It is not an appropriate question.

Moon: If North Korea does not change on its own, there is one of two solutions. One solution is the hard line approach of promoting regime change through forced system transformation or bringing about the collapse of North Korea through isolating it and imposing sanctions on it. The other solution is the moderate approach of inducing North Korea to adopt the choice we want through talks and negotiations that would include appropriate rewards. What approach do you support?

What is your assessment of the Lee Myung-bak administration's North Korea policy?

Gregg: "At first, aspiring after the Ch'ŏnan incident, very hostile"

Moon: "Motivated by hatred of North Korea and an expectation of its collapse"

What do you think are the prospects that North Korea will collapse?

Overholt: "Change is unavoidable ... a policy to handle an emergency situation is needed"

Gregg: “as financial difficulties lead to worsening conditions ... nuclear armaments will be reinforced”

Overholt: Taking a tough stance on the nuclear threat and the provocations posed by North Korea is a different matter from seeking the collapse of North Korea. A policy of isolation and sanctions alone will not be successful. If North Korea demonstrates an effort to improve its circumstances and to solve its internal problems, we need to demonstrate clearly a willingness to support these efforts and to provide assistance in a positive way as part of one combined policy package.

Gregg: An active, affirmative approach is needed in providing food assistance as a humanitarian issue. North Korea will shortly be facing the problem of the Barley Pass (“spring famine”). By providing support we can lay the foundation for getting back to talks sometime around May or June. It is pointless to just go on about how North Korea has to do this or that before we will engage in talks, or that North Korea of its own accord must surrender the nuclear means for preserving its system.

Moon: Well, then, once again there is something I want to ask. What is the difference between Obama and Bush?

Gregg: Clearly, Obama is heads above Bush.

Moon: Frankly speaking, I don’t see how he is any better.

Gregg: For example, the way Obama addressed the Arab nations in the speech he gave in Cairo, Egypt was truly outstanding. The problems of the Obama administration are due to the White House staff. While there are experts on China and Japan in the White House there is no expert on North Korea. Based on my ten years or so of experience working in the White House, whether it was President Reagan’s predicament over the Iran-Contra scandal or President Carter’s failed effort to deal with the Iran hostage crisis, the problem was that there was no one close to the president who could tell him that he was making a mistake. When things have gone wrong, it makes a critical difference whether or not there is an advisor close to the president who can tell him that if things go on as they are a problem will not be resolved. In President Park Chong-hee’s case as well, Presidential Security Chief Park Jong-gyu was someone close to the president who was able to deliver bad news, KCIA Chief Lee Hu-rak was not. He was someone who after meeting his lifelong enemy Kim Il Song was capable of praising him saying in halting English, “Quite a guy.” The chief of the presidential secretariat during the administration of President Chun Doo-hwan, Kim Kyung Won, couldn’t even stand hearing his name. Right now the White House is full of people who talk only about good news.

Moon: In my opinion, the second term of the Bush administration was much better if you compare it with the Obama administration.

Gregg: I wouldn’t make that kind of comparison. You certainly can say that the second term of the Bush administration was much better than the first term. Obama had to

wrestle with finding solutions to all of the serious problems he inherited from Bush. Obama couldn't focus on the North Korea problem. He also did not have an outstanding high-level aide who could deal with the North Korea issue.

Overholt: Obama had to prioritize policy dealing with the problems confronting him in managing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the financial crisis, etc. and it was unavoidable that the North Korea issue would be put on the back burner. Besides, North Korea policy is a very complicated issue.

Moon: It seems to me you are trying to avoid answering the question by making excuses rather than making a judgment.

Gregg: Well, that makes two of us ... (laughter)

Moon: The, what do you think of the Lee Myung-bak administration's North Korea policies such as "Nuclear-free • Open • 3000" policy, the Grand Bargain, etc.? They have been criticized as motivated by a hatred of North Korea and an expectation of its collapse.

Gregg: I had four opportunities to meet with President Lee between August 2009 and April 2010. During the first of these meetings, President Lee showed a very tough attitude toward North Korea since he had been the brunt of some intensely vituperative cant. Just two weeks later, however, I saw him in the Blue House right after he had met with the North Korean special envoys who had come to Seoul to convey Kim Jong Il's condolences on the death of the late President Kim Dae-jung. On that occasion he showed a friendly attitude toward the North Korean delegation and spoke very enthusiastically about the meeting he had just had with them. My next meeting with President Lee occurred during his visit to New York City for the opening of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2009. On that occasion he showed a positive attitude and expressed confidence that the issues surrounding North Korea would be resolved. I was hoping that President Lee as a strong conservative might play a role similar to the one played by President Nixon who was able to establish relations with Communist China precisely because of his reputation as a staunchly conservative anti-Communist. However, when I met President Lee for the fourth time in April 2010, he turned his face away from me and once again displayed a very hostile attitude toward North Korea. The tragic incident of the sinking of the Ch'ōnan seems to have had an unavoidable impact on the policy of the Lee administration. Nonetheless, North Korea's proposal for a joint investigation of the Ch'ōnan incident should have been accepted. It was a mistake not to have done so.

Moon: What do you think are the possibility that North Korea will collapse?

Overholt: We need to adopt an approach that leaves the door open for all possibilities. There is a difference between seeking the collapse of North Korea as a policy objective and preparing for that possibility. Measures for dealing with a sudden change are needed. It is not possible to envision North Korea being able to preserve its system indefinitely.

given the current circumstances. Change can not be avoided. North Korea, like China, must take the path of reform and opening up.

Gregg: In North Korea's current situation, it is continuing to increase its nuclear weapons capability while at the same time the state of its economy and the food situation deteriorates even further. Going on in this way the temptation of nuclear proliferation becomes greater. Back then at the time of the second nuclear threat in 2002, North Korea made the argument that it was either exercising its right of self-defense or engaging in nuclear deterrence. Nuclear proliferation in itself gives the lie to this argument. The possibility that North Korea will succumb to the temptation of nuclear proliferation is a very serious problem.

Moon: Do you see China as being able to play a positive and constructive role?

Overholt: China's role in restraining provocation by North Korea is limited and there's a sense of a feeling of frustration. However, China has begun to be more verbal about its expectations and as it continues to make efforts in this direction its influence will gradually increase. While a change in policy or replacement of the leadership may not be possible, a way may be opened up for a change in specific policies.

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