

all > North Korea

[Interview] Yoon's pursuit of strong security mustn't cost public's peace of mind, argues expert

Posted on : Jan.3,2023 15:14 KST Modified on : Jan.3,2023 15:14 KST

Moon Chung-in, a noted expert in the field of international relations and peace affairs, shares his thoughts on where we're headed in 2023



Moon Chung-in, chairperson of the Sejong Institute

On the Korean Peninsula and around the world, the political situation in 2022 was marked by conflict and strife: the intensifying strategic rivalry between the US and China, Russia's invasion of and protracted war with Ukraine, and the mounting Korean Peninsula arms race, with an increasingly visible frame pitting South Korea, the US, and Japan on one side against North Korea, China, and Russia on the other.

So where do the peninsula and the world head this year? Moon Chung-in, the chairperson of both the Sejong Institute and the Hankyoreh Foundation for Reunification and Culture, shared his opinions as an expert in this field.

Moon, who is currently staying in the US, took part in two email interviews at the end of 2022. In his responses, he stressed that the seeds of hope lie in the power and actions of ordinary people who do not want war. His interview responses are below.

Hankyoreh (Hani): Perhaps the single biggest event of last year was Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the long war that has ensued since. What sort of efforts do you think are needed to bring that war to a swift end?

Moon Chung-in (Moon): I think peace negotiations to end the war can begin when Russia, the aggressor, accedes to Ukraine's demands and withdraws at least partially from occupied territory. But the likelihood of Russia agreeing not just to a withdrawal from occupied regions but also to additional demands like returning the Crimean Peninsula, punishing war crimes, and paying compensation for the war is slim. In that sense, it looks inevitable that the war will continue in the long term.

As the war goes on, the rising death toll makes it even more difficult to end the conflict. The United States, the UN, and others need to take proactive steps before the situation deteriorates further. They need to start negotiating a truce, even if that means providing Russia with a face-saving way out and pressuring for a halt to weapon supplies to Ukraine.

Even in that case, there's a strong probability that Ukraine will remain a troubled region for a long time, much like the Korean Peninsula.

Hani: In addition to the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, another matter that is drawing attention is the strategic rivalry between the US and China. Do you see any potential for improving relations between Washington and Beijing?

Moon: I think the US-China summit that took place in Bali on Nov. 14 was quite significant. US President Joe Biden declared that there would be no new Cold War, and Chinese President Xi Jinping responded by calling for "taking history as a mirror to cultivate the future."

But the outlook isn't very bright. The US is simultaneously pursuing cooperation when it comes to things like climate change, infectious disease, and nuclear non-proliferation; competition when it comes to trade and technology; and confrontation when it comes to geopolitical and value-related areas.

For China's part, they'll find it difficult to cooperate with the US when it's threatening their key interests on matters like Taiwan, the South China Sea, and Xinjiang. What with those issues, the regulations imposed on China in high-tech areas like semiconductors, and the "China-bashing" climate in the US ahead of the 2024 presidential election, improving relations between Washington and Beijing isn't going to be easy.

Hani: Let's turn our focus to the Korean Peninsula. Some are suggesting that the Biden administration has been backsliding into a "strategic disregard" approach with its North Korea policy. How do you view the recent currents in the US?

Moon: The Biden administration's focus seems to be on strengthening its alliance to keep the Korean Peninsula situation on a stable footing while maintaining policies of maximum pressure with things like sanctions against the North. It's been somewhat reluctant to pursue a dialogue-based diplomatic resolution to the North Korean nuclear issue. It's been especially averse to the Trump model of summit diplomacy.

In addition, North Korea has been pushed far down on the Biden administration's list of foreign affairs and national security priorities. I think that climate is the reason people are talking about policies of "strategic disregard."

Meanwhile, the Yoon Suk-yeol administration has been calling vocally for a hard-line stance on the North. Under these circumstances, the chances of North Korea taking part in dialogue appear pretty much nonexistent.

Hani: What do you think is the reason the US has been so reluctant to take action at a time when North Korea is reaching new heights with the advancement of its nuclear capabilities, including things like intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs)?

Moon: It's not that the US has been reluctant to take any action on North Korea beefing up its nuclear capabilities. It has come out with a wide range of response strategies that include strengthening extended deterrence, increasing the frequency and intensity of joint military exercises with South Korea, periodically deploying strategic weapons, stepping up trilateral military cooperation with South Korea and Japan, and pushing for the international community to make North Korea into a pariah.

There seems to be an underlying strategic calculation here, which is about going beyond deterring North Korea and using a close-knit alliance with the South and military coordination with the South and Japan to keep China in check. But this kind of response also has the potential to bring about a hair-trigger situation on the Korean Peninsula, and it could make resolving the North Korean nuclear issue an even more distant prospect.

Hani: We're hearing growing calls for an incremental approach to denuclearization. What's your opinion on whether it's possible to achieve denuclearization in a situation where North Korea treats nuclear capabilities as a matter of national honor?

Moon: In announcing the adoption of a law codifying the national nuclear armament policy last Sept. 8, Kim Jong-un said that nuclear capabilities represented "our nation's dignity and honour," "the absolute might of our Republic," and "a source of the great pride of the Korean people."

He was stressing that North Korea's status as a nuclear power was something irreversible, adding to the past counterattack focus of the deterrence strategy by making official the policies of preemptive nuclear weapon use and tactical nuclear weapon deployment. This makes the North's denuclearization into that much tougher an issue.

Even so, denuclearizing North Korea is a goal that we cannot afford to give up on. Since it isn't possible for us to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue in one fell swoop, we need to take a more gradual path consisting of a freeze, reductions, and eventual abandonment. If necessary, we should hold arms reduction negotiations as part of the process.

In particular, we need to make a gradual tradeoff between denuclearization and what the North desires with the mitigation of hostile policies, based on a principle of simultaneous action. For that to happen, there first needs to be a recovery of trust between North Korea and the US and between South and North Korea.

Preemptive concessions from powerful countries like the US would go some way in breaking through the current impasse.

Hani: Here in South Korea, we're also hearing more vocal calls for our own nuclear armament from people who believe it's too late to achieve denuclearization. Some are suggesting the US might consent to it if we do a good enough job of persuading them. What are your thoughts on this?

Moon: The extreme anti-China contingent in Washington has been arguing for allowing the nuclear armament of South Korea and Japan as a response to China's rise. There are also isolationists who think South Korea should be permitted to arm itself with nuclear weapons and US Forces for Korea should be withdrawn, since they leave the US vulnerable to being held hostage by North Korea's nuclear capabilities.

In South Korea, some of the conservatives have been calling for lobbying along Israeli lines to get the US to agree to our independent nuclear armament. But that's just wishful thinking.

In Washington, the non-proliferationists who insist that South Korea's nuclear armament cannot be allowed still hold an overwhelming advantage. There's also a widespread view in the US that a nuclear-armed South Korea would be difficult to control.

In Israel's case, they went about their nuclear program in secret over a long period; even now, they maintain a "neither confirm nor deny" attitude. There's no way the US would support a country like us talking about overtly developing nuclear capabilities. We also don't have anything like the tremendous lobbying strength that Israel has.

In the end, if there were a "nuclear domino effect" in Northeast Asia as a result of allowing South Korea's nuclear armament, that would only weaken the US' hegemonic status. The likelihood of the US accepting that is almost zero.

Hani: The hope for peace seems to be waning. Where might we find some grounds for hope?

Moon: We need to take an object lesson from the situation in Ukraine. To begin with, once a war begins and the death toll rises, the war becomes more difficult to end. You end up in a mire of war and death, where the victims are innocent ordinary people.

Ordinary people are the ones who need to take action to prevent war and preserve peace. We can find grounds for hope when the public stands at the forefront of peace with great strength.

Hani: Finally, is there any request you'd like to make to the Yoon administration?

Moon: It's all well and fine to have slogans about "strong security," but I wish they would stop stoking public anxiety.

Our security environment has become precarious with things like the mounting tensions with North Korea, our awkward relationships with China and Russia, and the aggressive actions taken by Japan. I'd like to see them properly reading the geopolitical currents and creating an

environment where the public can live with peace of mind.

Also, it's nice to have "values-based diplomacy," but they also should be looking after the national interest in a practical sense. I'd prefer to see less wedge politics and a broader perspective in their approach to foreign affairs and national security, where they seek a popular consensus. After all, administrations are temporary, but the public is forever.

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

Please direct questions or comments to [english@hani.co.kr]

Original Korean

related stories

- [Column] It's time for S. Korea to think seriously about crisis stability
- [Column] Is an economic security alliance with US in Korea's best interest?
- US must engage in "preventive diplomacy" before N. Korea tests another nuke, says expert
- [Column] Suggestions for Yoon to build facts-based foreign policy
- [Column] National security policy should be based on one thing: Facts