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South Korea is seeking to find a balance in Northeast Asia

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Professor of political science at Yonsei University and Editor-in-Chief of Global Asia, Moon Chung-In is a former Ambassador for International Security Affairs and former Chairman of the Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative, a cabinet-level post during the Roh Moo-hyun presidency.

He was interviewed by Antoine Bondaz, coordinator of the Korea Program at Asia Centre, in December 2013 on various issues including the rising tensions in the Korean peninsula last spring, the eventuality of a restart of the Six Party Talks, the rapprochement between Seoul and Beijing under the new leadership of Park Geun-hye and South Korea's "global diplomacy".

Antoine Bondaz: *How do you explain the rising tensions last spring 2013 in the Korean Peninsula and how big is North Korea's responsibility? Concerning these tensions, could you please come back on an expression you used in an interview for NKnews, "North Korea's cry for survival"?*

Moon Chung-In: North Korea, South Korea, and the U.S. were all responsible for the rising tensions last spring. First, the U.S. provided the North with excuses for its belligerence. The Foal Eagle exercise was originally designed to prepare for North Korean Special Forces' infiltration into the rear area of South Korea. But last

year was different. The United States deployed strategic weapons that were unprecedented. In addition to nuclear submarine, the U.S. deployed B-52 and B-2 strategic bombers that are capable of delivering nuclear bombs. And B-2 bomber was mobilized from a base in the U.S. mainland. F-22 stealth fighters and an Aegis destroyer were also deployed in the latest exercise.

Second, the North showed overly sensitive reactions in the form of harsh rhetoric and assertive behavior. The North declared the nullification of armistice agreement, put the highest combat alert order to its forces, Kim Jong Un's convening of key operational meeting and giving instruction to his missile combat unit to prepare for targeting Guam. Two factors should have motivated Kim to take such harsh measures. One is its traditional preoccupation with deterrence. It can be seen as North Korea's cry for "don't attack us. If you attack us, we can strike back". The other is for domestic political purpose. Kim might have to respond in such a way in order to display his charismatic decisiveness to the people, to address a harsh reality of mounting insecurity, and to consolidate his control over the military. In a sense, it was the increased US threats that made the North Korean leadership show provocative behavior, and Kim Jong Un utilized such threats for domestic political purpose.

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Finally, South Korea was also partly responsible. After North Korea's missile testing launch and its third nuclear testing, Seoul could have taken measures to mitigate tension on the Korean peninsula. On the contrary, it bandwagoned with the U.S. in undertaking a tough showdown. However, given domestic political considerations, there was no other choice but to show resolute attitude on North Korea.

Antoine Bondaz: What are your views on what appeared to be a degradation of PRC/DPRK relations following the third nuclear test, on February 12 and on the “reinforced cooperation” between Beijing and Washington on the denuclearization of the Peninsula?

Moon Chung-In: Immediately following the third nuclear testing, China took stern measures by complying with UN sanction resolutions on North Korea. In April, the Chinese Ministry of Transportation instructed local governments and enterprises to ban the shipping of commodities and materials on the UN sanction list, and in May, the Bank of China, The Industrial and Commercial Bank, the Construction Bank, and the Agricultural Bank suspended banking transactions with North Korea. Nevertheless, the China's behavior seems rather passive in the sense that it has been complying only with UN sanctions.

Beijing did not take any independent punitive measures on Pyongyang. Compared with the year 2012, overall bilateral trade volume rose by 4.4 percent as of September 2013, and oil exports increased from \$55 million in January to \$115 million in March. In addition, Choi Ryong-hae, chief of general political bureau of North Korea's people's army, paid a visit to Beijing and was received by President Xi Jinping in May. China also reciprocated by sending Vice President Li Yuanhao to North Korea, in July, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Korean armistice agreement. Moreover, the Chinese government has made it clear that “sanctions for the sake of sanctions” are not wise and that they should serve as an instrument to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem through dialogue and negotiation.

It can be generally argued that although China has become tougher than before, the thrust of its policy on North has not changed. The Chinese expression of “*huantang buhuanyao*” (换汤不换药, change medicine container, but no change of medicine) seems to properly denote the China policy on North Korea

Antoine Bondaz: Do you believe China holds the key to solve the issues in the Peninsula, including the denuclearization?

Moon Chung-In: I do not believe that China is the key to resolve the peninsula issues. They should be resolved by Koreans themselves, be they peace regime, unification, or nuclear issues. However, China can play an important role in resolving the Korean problems. China is a major stakeholder in transforming the armistice regime into a peace regime because it is a legal party to the armistice agreement. Along with the U.S., China has also become a crucial outside actor in shaping strategic balancing on the Korean peninsula. At the same time, China is the chair country of the Six Party Talks that are essential for resolving the North Korean nuclear quagmire. Likewise, Beijing can

exercise profound impacts on the management of Korean peninsula issues.

Antoine Bondaz: Could you please comment the track 1.5 conference organized by the CIIS, in Beijing, last September in order to celebrate the 10 years of the Six Party Talks¹. How do you interpret the DPRK's stance and the US' attitude?

Moon Chung-In: The arrangement suggested that Beijing has turned proactive in its mediating role and reviving the six-party platform, which has been in deep freeze since the last meeting, in December 2008. China has become more engaged in settling North Korea's nuclear problem because the conundrum has the capacity to seriously undermine China's “core interests.” China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi - who, as an envoy to the six-party talks, mediated to normalize the multi-country process during an impasse in 2005 and produce the landmark Sept. 19, 2005 Joint Statement - has been keen on reactivating the six-party platform.

China's aggressive engagement in international affairs is also part of President Xi Jinping's foreign policy based on a “new type of relationship between big powers in the 21st century,” which China outlined during Xi's visit to the United States, that works toward “enhancing cooperation and coordination in international affairs and on global issues” while “respecting core interests” of each nation instead of fighting over global predominance. China wants to prove its diplomatic and peacemaking prowess by reviving the six-party negotiations on North Korea's nuclear weapons through a formal process and establishing a lasting peace and security framework in the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia.

Chinese speakers at the forum all emphasized the need for a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula by reopening the six-party negotiations as soon as possible. They partly blamed the United States for dragging its feet. Some advised that Washington ease conditions to sit down at the table for the six-party talks and become more tolerant toward North Korea. Their comments dashed hopes that Beijing's attitude and policy - blindly protective of Pyongyang - has changed after North Korea carried out a third nuclear test despite Beijing's warning not to.

Pyongyang's presence in the part-governmental, part-private conference stood out. Key members of the diplomatic process on the nuclear problem were present, including Kim Kye-gwan, North Korea's first vice foreign minister, and Ri Yong-ho, vice foreign minister and Pyongyang's chief nuclear negotiator. They echoed the same opinions of Chinese members as if they were reading from the same script. In his opening speech, Kim said denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula had been the wish of North Korean leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong-il and is the country's top priority. He demanded an unconditional resumption of the six-party talks and compliance with the Sept. 19, 2005 Joint Statement that laid out a nuclear dismantlement procedure in return for aid and economic cooperation from the other five countries.

¹ The China Institute of International Studies, a research arm of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, invited government officials and scholars to an international conference in Beijing on Sept. 18 to search for a breakthrough in the long stalemate in the six-party talks

Ri elaborated on the so-called economy-first agenda of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. He said 90 percent of Kim's 30 tours in the last three to four months have been related to the economy. His visits to military sites were meant to check on the welfare of the soldiers, Ri said. But he also said that Pyongyang cannot surrender nuclear weapons unless Washington lifts its hostile policy toward North Korea. His comments showed that Pyongyang remains wedded to its stance of "conditional denuclearization," or dismantlement based on mutual respect, equality and tit-for-tat actions and reactions that were the ideas behind the Joint Statement.

The government representatives from South Korea, the United States and Japan were of ranks lower than the Chinese and North Korean officials, and they attended the conference as observers rather than speakers. The American guests from the civilian sector reiterated Washington's official stance on North Korea. Their comments reflected Washington's remaining doubts about North Korea's commitment to denuclearization. They maintained that any talks - either on the multilateral or bilateral level - can resume when North Korea shows some decisive action toward denuclearization first.

Seoul synchronized its stance with Washington's. But it displayed some discomfort stuck in the middle between Washington and Beijing.

Antoine Bondaz: *How do you analyze President Park's policy towards China and Japan? Is a rapprochement with China a direct consequence of the deterioration of ROK/Japan relations?*

Moon Chung-In: President Park has sought a more active diplomacy with China, while having refused to have a bilateral summit with her Japanese counterpart, Prime Minister Abe. Park Geun-hee was well aware of the failure of Lee Myung-bak's China policy and framed her China policy to correct it. During the Lee government, Beijing-Seoul ties strained not only because of Lee's hard-line policy on North Korea, but also Seoul's too pro-American alliance stance. In addition, Seoul's efforts to undermine the Beijing-led Six Party Talks through its 'De-nuke, Open 3,000 policy' were also responsible for the stalled bilateral relationship. Thus, Park wanted to amend the broken ties.

She also keenly appreciated China's strategic importance over North Korea as well as peninsular affairs. Equally important is her memory of her father Park Chung-hee's anxiety resulting from the Nixon shock in 1972. In 1969, President Nixon announced the Guam doctrine under the slogan of "Asian defense by the hands of Asians" and began to weaken its security commitment to South Korea by reducing the size of American ground force stationed there amidst heightened military provocation. More critically, Henry Kissinger and Nixon sought a secret diplomacy of détente with China that bypassed South Korea. President Park Chung-hee felt abandoned by the U.S., propelling his quest of self-defense and nuclear weapons, and actively sought to cultivate ties with Chinese leadership in vain. Park's memory of the trauma in the early 1970s must have renewed her interest in China. In fact, she began to learn Chinese long before China's rise, and paid utmost attention to the cultivation of personal ties with Chinese political leaders.

In view of this, Park's policy stance on China has been shaped more by her emphasis on a balanced diplomacy between Beijing and Washington, D.C. than by worsening relations with Japan. However, China has been undertaking a diplomatic offensive to co-opt South Korea in fighting against Japan. Beijing wants closer ties with Seoul as it obviously cannot expect better relations with Tokyo under the leadership of Abe. Chinese cite three reasons why China and South Korea should cooperate:

First, Koreans and the Chinese are united in their complaints against Japan's stand on issues of history and territory. The Chinese demand a joint front with South Korea to deal with Japanese politicians' repeated provocations by visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, where Class-A war criminals from World War II are honored, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's controversial remarks on past aggressions, and the so-called comfort women or sex slaves. They also suggest joint actions on the global stage to resolve territorial disputes over the Dokdo islets and Diaoyu Islands as they too are byproducts of Japan's past military aggressions. The most recent visit to Yasukuni by Prime Minister Abe has contributed to fostering such ties between Beijing and Seoul.

Second, both countries are worried about Japan's military buildup. Japan's plan to exercise its right to collective self-defense with the endorsement of the U.S. government and a stronger bilateral security alliance with Washington could undermine multilateral cooperation for security in the region. Japan has also turned passive toward a tripartite free trade agreement by pursuing a separate regional economic bloc with the United States. *Abenomics* - with its beggar-thy-neighbor features - could jeopardize regional economic stability.

Third, Tokyo has irked Seoul and Beijing with a blunt snub. It has sent an obvious message that it doesn't need summit talks with South Korea or China. It feels safe enough with the United States on its side and believes South Korea will eventually seek its help in times of emergency.

What Beijing fears most is a joint front among traditional security allies, meaning South Korea, the United States and Japan. Its regional stance could be at risk if South Korea signs a treaty with Japan on exchanging confidential military information or establishing a stronger three-way missile defense system with the United States and Japan. Beijing may secretly be smiling at the recent fissure in the traditional tripartite alliance stemming from strained ties between Seoul and Tokyo.

Antoine Bondaz: *South Korea is trying to go global and to get out of its Northeast Asian shackles focusing on its growing international role. Would you say the South Korean diplomacy has so far been successful in doing so?*

Moon Chung-In: Yes, the Lee Myung-bak government was most active in promoting global agenda by hosting several major conferences such as G-20 summit in 2010 and the Nuclear Security summit in 2012). It also successfully campaigned the Green Growth initiative, which resulted in the establishment of the Global Green Growth Institute as an international organization. In addition, the Lee government undertook an assertive ODA

diplomacy by increasing its budget.

However, the Park government seems to be more focused on the Korean peninsula and regional affairs than on global ones. I would say that South Korea's global diplomacy has been a limited success. It still suffers from lack of agenda development, funding, and political attention.