

**"Kim Jong-un would be the first to congratulate Trump on his return next year," former unification minister Jae Kyu Park says**

**[Interview] "Neither North Korea nor the United States is interested in dialogue next year... South Korea should plan to improve relations with Russia and China."**

<Jae Kyu Park, President of Kyungnam University, talks to News1 Korea at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies at Kyungnam University in Jongno-gu, Seoul, on December 18.>

<Jae Kyu Park, President of Kyungnam University, explains the inter-Korean situation at the signing of the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration, standing in front of the photo hanging at Kyungnam University's Institute for Far Eastern Studies in Seoul, on December 18.>

Dr. Jae Kyu Park, President of Kyungnam University, says North Korea will not try to create momentum for dialogue with the Joe Biden administration next year but instead “may expect that the former President Donald Trump will return to power.”

Park, who served as the unification minister under former President Kim Dae-jung, pointed to next November’s U.S. presidential election as a key variable that will affect international affairs. He anticipated as well that Kim Jong-un would be one of those “leaders who quickly send out messages congratulating Trump on his victory.”

Under the current U.S. administration and circumstances, Park expected that the United States and North Korea would continue to show little interest in dialogue next year. The Biden administration is expected to maintain a “management mode” on the Korean Peninsula based on U.S.–South Korean cooperation as it prepares for the presidential election, and North Korea is also expected to stick to a “tit-for-tat” response to the U.S. and South Korea’s hardline stance while making efforts to build triangular solidarity with China and Russia.

However, noting that the strengthening of the ROK-U.S.-Japan versus North Korea-Russia-China rivalry “not only shrinks the space for South Korea’s strategic flexibility in its relations with China, Russia, and North Korea but also constrains progress in inter-Korean relations,”

Park said South Korea should respond to North Korea's nuclear weapons advancement with strengthened deterrence while at the same time promoting friendly relations with China and Russia. He also pointed out the need for a system to prevent accidental clashes following the breakdown of the September 19 inter-Korean military agreement and stabilize the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

The following is a transcript of the interview with Park, which took place at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies of Kyungnam University in Samcheong-dong, Seoul, on December 18, 2023.

■ **What is the biggest change in North Korea this year?**

With a strategy of shutting off its relations with South Korea and the United States and utilizing the neo-Cold War structure, North Korea has paved the way to strengthen a full range of cooperation with Russia and China. North Korea seems to have reversed the direction it had maintained in improving relations with the United States through the past 30 years of denuclearization negotiations. In particular, making a breakthrough in countering international sanctions and reinforcing its nuclear arms through military cooperation with Russia has shown the possibility of a change from the US-centered diplomacy that has been the core of North Korea's foreign policy.

■ **How do you assess the Yoon administration's policies in coping with the changing security landscape on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia?**

South Korea launched the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) with the Washington Declaration this year and strengthened the trilateral security cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea. Strengthening deterrence against North Korea's nuclear capabilities through the ROK-US alliance may be a good achievement. However, it is regrettable that relations with China and Russia were relatively neglected, causing a possible counteraction in resolving the Korean Peninsula issue. Inter-Korean relations have also deteriorated. It is important to keep in mind that the credibility of extended deterrence cannot be enhanced indefinitely by strengthening security pledges or threats to North Korea.

■ **Some people say that it is not going to be easy for the United States to focus on the**

### **Korean Peninsula due to the war in Ukraine and events in the Middle East.**

It does not seem that the war in Ukraine and the Middle East conflict will have a significant impact on the security environment on the Korean Peninsula. The U.S. has no intention of actively intervening in the Russo-Ukraine war, and its involvement in the Middle East is likely to be limited. Since the U.S. most values maintaining a strategic balance in Asia, it is unlikely to make moves that may bring a major change to this region. The most critical variable that could affect the international order in the coming year is the outcome of the U.S. presidential election in November.

### **■ Will North Korea and the United States show an interest in talking to each other in the year leading up to the U.S. election?**

It is unlikely that the Biden administration will attempt to engage in dialogue with North Korea before the election. The economy is the top issue for American voters, and foreign affairs are relatively low on their list. Furthermore, because the Biden administration is preoccupied with the U.S.-China strategic rivalry, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Israeli-Hamas conflict, North Korea is unlikely to capture the attention of U.S. policymakers unless Pyongyang conducts its seventh nuclear test. North Korea is also unlikely to try to gain momentum for dialogue with the Biden administration. Instead, Pyongyang may look forward to Trump's return.

### **■ What will be North Korea's move if Trump returns to power?**

Kim Jong-un may be among the leaders who would quickly send out messages congratulating Trump on his victory. Looking to capitalize on their past meeting, Kim Jong-un could send a second "love letter" to Trump expressing his desire to resume dialogue, which could include an invitation to Pyongyang. We can't rule out the possibility that Trump will also invite Kim to the United States. If a meeting takes place, North Korea may try once again to achieve its goals with Trump, reflecting on the failure in Hanoi.

If Trump returns to power, the South Korean government should be ready to deal with many changes in the international order, including those on the Korean Peninsula. It will need a sophisticated national strategy that will allow it to respond wisely in the situation where Pyongyang and Washington are linked directly to each other.

**■ If neither party is interested in dialogue, how do you see North Korea's foreign strategy and U.S. stance on North Korea in the next year?**

The U.S.-ROK coordination on North Korea under the Yoon and Biden administrations is solid. This means that North Korea is unlikely to succeed if it tries to disrupt the relationship. Therefore, North Korea will continue to maintain a “tit-for-tat” hardline strategy in response to the U.S. and South Korea’s hardline stance, while believing that it is more practical to choose to cooperate with China and Russia for its own interests and needs.

The Biden administration is also unlikely to intentionally create tension or actively pursue dialogue with North Korea, given that its focus is on the presidential election in November 2024. In North Korea, the United States is expected to adhere firmly to a “management mode” while maintaining full coordination with South Korea.

**■ This year, there has been a remarkable strengthening of ties between North Korea and Russia. North Korea, Russia, and China are poised to extend their trilateral collaboration even more next year.**

The solidarity among North Korea, Russia, and China will be promoted basically as a response to the increasing cooperation among South Korea, the U.S., and Japan. Yet, there is a certain limit to the trilateral solidarity because there is accumulated mistrust among North Korea, Russia, and China, and their solidarity is driven by practical needs. In particular, unlike North Korea and Russia, which want to expand cooperation with China, China is still reluctant to engage in military cooperation with them. China thinks that strengthening military cooperation with them would mean joining the ranks of countries under Western sanctions. It sees no value in trilateral cooperation in either maintaining or advancing its relations with the United States and the rest of the West and seemingly hopes to play a mere mediating role. Rather than trilateral cooperation, China is likely to try to secure influence on the Korean Peninsula through bilateral relations with North Korea and Russia. As for North Korea, China is likely to continue to provide economic aid and cooperation to keep Pyongyang under its influence.

**■ There are also rumors about North Korea and Japan making contact. Could Japan play a role in making North Korea move?**

The more Japan strengthens its defense capabilities and builds more solid trilateral security

cooperation under the pretext of threats from its neighbors, the more it may cause a backlash from North Korea. In addition, without a groundbreaking solution for the issues involving the abduction of Japanese citizens, it will be difficult to find a breakthrough in improving relations between North Korea and Japan. In improving its relations with Japan, North Korea expects Japan's economic cooperation through the liquidation of the past, but as long as the UN sanctions against North Korea continue, Pyongyang cannot expect large-scale economic cooperation from Japan.

■ **What are your recommendations for the government's North Korea policy next year?**

South Korea should maintain and strengthen trilateral security cooperation and build a real and effective deterrence against North Korea's nuclear arms while promoting mutually beneficial relations with North Korea, Russia, and China to stably manage national security risks. The heightening of conflict between South Korea, the United States, and Japan on one side and North Korea, Russia, and China on the other not only shrinks South Korea's space for strategic flexibility in dealing with Russia and North Korea but also restricts progress in inter-Korean relations. Countermeasures should be taken to prevent the deepening of the Cold War confrontation following the increased solidarity among North Korea, Russia, and China, which leads to military tensions.

South Korea should also introduce a crisis prevention and management system to keep the situation under control on the Korean Peninsula, including the possibility of accidental clashes along the military demarcation line. It is urgent to reestablish direct telephone lines and military communication channels between the two Koreas. At the same time, the two Koreas should do their best to create a new paradigm for improving inter-Korean relations in accordance with changes in the international order and work closely with the United States and China to create the momentum for change.

■ **Some people argue that the forced repatriation of North Korean defectors has made China less accessible for South Korea. What is the solution for China-South Korea relations?**

South Korea should clearly communicate to China its position on issues in bilateral relations and maintain a principled stance that prioritizes national interests. It is too risky for South

Korea to impetuously choose one side among the United States, Russia, and China. Instead, it should seek to develop a “strategic partnership” with all three countries through consistent messages and actions based on its national interests.

**■ North Korea is expected to ease the border blockade further next year. On which do you think North Korea will focus more—economic growth or defense—next year?**

I anticipate that the internal and external environment will continue to create a situation where North Korea will have no choice but to immerse itself in upgrading its nuclear arsenal and building up its arms. Of course, it will also focus on economic development and improving people’s lives in its own way. To a limited degree, it will gradually open its borders with China and Russia to resume tourism and expand economic cooperation. However, it will be difficult to solve the fundamental economic crisis.

**■ North Korea has successfully launched the Hwasong-18 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and a reconnaissance satellite this year. What weapons systems will it focus on next year?**

North Korea will continue to focus on making progress in reinforcing its national defense capabilities as proposed at the 8th Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK). I expect that North Korea will unveil the new whale-class (former Soviet G-class) submarines and nuclear submarines and focus on technological enhancement in the field of advanced weapons, including the live launch of the Pukguksong (Polaris)-3 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), further development of hypersonic missiles, and confirmation of normal-angle launch and atmospheric reentry technologies of its ICBM.

**■ What do you think North Korea’s intention is in using the expression “Republic of Korea”?**

I think North Korea’s use of the name “Republic of Korea” is meant to set up a confrontation with the South. The Kim Jong-un regime has shifted from “ethnocentrism” to “nation-firstism” and embodied the concept of “two states” in the relationship between South and North Korea. As inter-Korean relations deteriorated, North Korea also neutralized its organs specializing in South Korean relations, such as the Committee for Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland. Inter-Korean relations, however, are difficult to approach as diplomacy between two sovereign

countries. This is due to the peculiarities of internal relations within the same people. Denying this makes it difficult for the two Koreas to exercise self-determination in inter-Korean relations. I do not believe that North Korea's use of the name "Republic of Korea" reflects a permanent change in its strategy to put inter-Korean relations under the umbrella of general "diplomacy." Nor is it easy to do so.

■ **North Korea persistently exposes Kim Jong-un's daughter, Ju-ae, to the public.**

We need to be cautious in our approach to this issue while keeping all possibilities open. Ju-ae has been making frequent appearances with Kim Jong-un at important military-related events, but we still don't have enough evidence to make a judgment yet. Based on what we have seen so far, my assessment is that Kim Jong-un is using Ju-ae to project his image as a responsible leader, ensuring the safety of future generations. It seems that he is also demonstrating his commitment to the power succession by the fourth generation of the Kim family. By placing his daughter up front, Kim is showing off the undiminished presence of his family's Baekdu bloodline.

It is also difficult to imagine Ju-ae's emergence being aimed at simply assigning to her the role of a government official with specific duties. If that was Kim's intention, she would not need to accompany her father to public events, be photographed alone, and be addressed with the most honorific titles reserved only for supreme leaders. Whether Ju-ae will remain simply a symbolic member of the Baekdu bloodline or not will depend on the abilities and qualities she demonstrates in the future, as well as her father Kim Jong-un's strategic decision.

■ **What is the next step Ju-ae needs to take if she is one of the likely candidates for power succession?**

When looking back on the succession process for Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, there are several steps that an heir needs to take. To ensure the continuity of the supreme leader's leadership, the heir must go through the WPK's leadership procedure (official nomination of a successor), and the party and military system must be overhauled so that their leadership will unite behind the successor. In addition, an extensive idolization campaign for Ju-ae must be promoted. Furthermore, she must have the right to expound on North Korea's national strategies, including the Juche ideology, and guide the projects aimed at South Korea.