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# INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR CHO BYUNG-JAE

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*Dr. Cho is an expert in international politics within Northeast Asia with special interests in North Korean foreign relations and foreign policy. He gives a detailed analysis and opinion on the COVID-19 situation on the Korean Peninsula and around the world, providing insight into what the short- and long-term impacts of this pandemic might be. He discusses what can be observed from the North Korean responses to COVID-19, and how it can affect the internal balance within the Korean Peninsula, foreign relations, and inter-Korean relations. The interview closes with a morale-boosting commentary on the need for solidarity around the world and the opportunity that such a crisis can propel.*

**Y: First, could you give a bit more insight into your fields of study and your major interest points in your research?**

CBJ: Yes, as you know, I'm a Korean diplomat, and during my service in the Foreign Ministry, I've been involved with the affairs with North Korea, the Korean-US relationship, the US-North Korea relationship, and some international politics in the region of Northeast Asia. So, I can roughly say that is my area of interest. Particularly, while I was in the service, I had a course at the University of North Korean studies, which is located near Gyeongbokgung Palace; that was an interesting time. My dissertation was on North Korea-China-US relationship particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I looked into around that time how North Korea responded to the very sudden and rapid transformations in global politics. That was the time when the Cold War was coming to an end, the Soviet Union collapsed, Eastern Europe was also transforming, and China was just starting to open and reform. China was establishing democratic relationship with South Korea, North Korea was put into a very difficult time economically, diplomatically, and so on. How North Korea responded to all these changes and transformations was a very interesting subject, so I tried to explore that. So maybe I think that was one occasion that had deepened my interest further in North Korea.

**Y: The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted countries all over the world and South Korea's response to it, which is testing, tracking, tracing, and treating, has been both praised and criticized. What contributes to differences in COVID-19 responses and outcomes in the Korean Peninsula as a whole when compared to other countries like the US or European countries and other Asian countries?**

CBJ: Since the major outbreak of COVID-19 in Korea, for the last couple of months, Korea has quite successfully coped with this outbreak pandemic, and in that sense, I think Korea was quite lucky. Or, you can say, fortunately Korea was, in a sense, prepared to cope with this pandemic. What I'm trying to say is that we had some contagious diseases before. We have this novel Corona virus attack, we had SARS in 2002, we had the H1N1 influenza, and we had MERS in 2015. And particularly the MERS outbreak, which we had five years ago, caused much damage to Korea at the time. Taking this as an opportunity, it became an occasion where Korea almost rewrote its textbooks and its manuals on our strategy to cope with any contagious diseases. So, we have strengthened our legislations, we have some stockpiles of basic materials since then, and we have streamlined all these procedures, which made it easier for the authorities to have access to some information and resources to cope with this pandemic. That was one important aspect. We were experienced, and it was a quite an exercise, practice, or training, something like that. Another point is that because of the outbreak of contagious diseases, which is transmitted through air, particularly the respiratory system and because of the fine dust we had for many years in Korea, coming from China, Korea had [already] built the facilities to manufacture some face masks, swabs and so on — some basic materials to treat respiratory diseases. That was also an advantage for Korea in coping with the disease pandemic. Because we made mistakes and some missteps, particularly in 2015, this time the government tried to rely upon the experts. It sounds very natural that in this kind of situation, we have to rely upon the experts, but you can see that it is not always the case. But this time in Korea, the leadership trusted the experts and delegated authorities and their responsibilities to the experts. And they quite successfully performed and they gained the trust of the Korean people/citizens. People fully cooperated. I think these all functioned in a very positive way so that this time Korea rather successfully coped with this pandemic. But we know that this is not all of the story; there are still some small pockets of remaining viruses in Korea and the whole world is now struggling to cope with this disease, so we don't know when we are going to have a second or third wave of this virus. So you cannot let your guard down. And you mentioned that Korea is criticized also; we are aware that because of the tracking or tracing of the infected, then the authorities have access to CCTV or to your credit card use records, and your cellphone records and so on, it means there arose a problem/issue of individual privacy. But I think that this time the South Korean government tries to maintain the balance between public need and privacy. So, I think you need to find some balance between these two. If you insist on the privacy, then you can have a lot of damage to the public and the people around you, and we cannot just give up the privacy and the individual freedoms for the sake of collective safety. In order to cope with the situation, I think finding the balance is very important. I think to a certain extent, we have succeeded in that regard as well. It's not over yet; we are just in the third month of this outbreak. I still think we have a long way to go. Even though now the countries in Europe and some states in North America are trying to reopen their economy, as soon as you reopen the economy, you see that this virus is coming back. So we are not really quite sure how long it would take to completely overcome this disease. Before that time, we cannot just let our guards down. That's a big problem.

**Y: What major points of interest can be seen in the North Korean response to COVID-19? Are there any notable points of comparison between the response of the North Korean regime and that of the South Korean government like you mentioned? And, if so, how has it affected the state of the peninsula as a whole?**

CBJ: I think this time North Korea has taken an effective measure at a very early stage of the outbreak. For example, China declared a lockdown on the city of Wuhan on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, but three days before that time, North Korea [had] suspended flights from Beijing to Pyongyang. It means that it has stopped the possibility of transmission from China to North Korea through air route. Just a couple of days later, it closed [its] border with China. You know that North Korea has quite a long border with China (1,420 kms). It completely closed this border and also its border with Russia. Around that time, there were some South Korean people/staff at Kaesong Industrial Complex — around 20 or 30 some people — and North Korea requested them to return to South Korea as well. So you can see that North Korea completely sealed its borders with the three neighbors: China, Russia, and South Korea. All the foreigners within North Korea, particularly in Pyongyang, including diplomats, were put under self-isolation, or a kind of quarantine for almost 1 month. So, it means that North Korea physically separated itself from the rest of the world. That was the first interesting feature of the way North Korea responded to the pandemic. The second one is that you must also have noticed that North Korea had [done] the utmost to protect their leader. So, they sealed all the borders, and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un had disappeared from the public scene for almost around 3 weeks. He even skipped the national event of celebrating his grandfather's birthday. When he came back, when he had some other events, then they made enough social distancing measures for their leader. Every country takes precautionary measures to their leadership, but in the case of North Korea, it was very conspicuous. And the third aspect was that North Korea started to put a lot of emphasis on ideological indoctrination. It was enforced that since the country was facing a difficult situation, the people need to overcome it with revolutionary passion and national spirit. So almost everyday, on North Korean media channels, such as the newspaper, *Rodong Sinmun* or Central News Television, people came out, telling others to get through this pandemic with vigor and loyalty to the Party under the leadership of Chairman Kim. So, I can say that these can be the three most conspicuous features in North Korea's response to the pandemic, and these measures can be efficient and effective in responding to this disease. However, [these] extreme measures cannot be emulated by South Korea or any other democratic countries because there will be potential violation and infringement of human rights.

**Y: So would you actually say that in the course of trying to respond to this pandemic that *Juche* was a key factor as well in trying to control the situation?**

CBJ: *Juche* is a theme you can find every time and everywhere in life in North Korea. So, this time as well, North Korea did not particularly request for any assistance from outside countries like South Korea or China. I think we proposed to North Korea that

we are ready to provide some assistance, know-how, or equipment to cope with the situation. However, North Korea did not respond positively, and I did not hear anything about North Korea asking for help from China or Russia. So, that expresses a part of *Juche* ideology — the so-called self-reliance. Reading this official statement or media reports from North Korea, you can see that, again, there is emphasis on self-reliance— that you have to produce some materials on your own, and we have to utilize all the resources we have in our hands to cope with the situation. So I think *Juche* ideology is again working in North Korea. *Juche* is a part of your life in North Korea.

**Y: North Korea's case is somewhat peculiar in that it has not *officially* reported any cases of COVID-19, and certain reports have verified that the efforts to contain the virus were relatively successful despite the general weakness of the country's healthcare infrastructure. What, would you say, were the specific actions or precautions that North Korea had taken that had led to this supposedly successful containment? Is there anything that can be learned or even imitated from the North Korean response?**

CBJ: As you said, North Korea has not reported any confirmed COVID-19 cases. However, no reporting does not necessarily mean that there has not been any case in North Korea. So, many people outside North Korea are suspecting that North Korean authorities are not telling the whole truth. As I said, North Korea is bordering with China, and it has a rather long border with China (more than 1,400 km). Second, from North Korean official news media as well, there are several stories about several hundred or [even] several thousand people that were put under quarantine. They said that it was some kind of precautionary measure, but segregating some people for quarantine or for self-isolation cannot but be some kind of meaningful measure here. We know that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has been away from the capital for quite a long time — an exceptionally long time. So, these all point to the direction that North Korea might have had some problems with this COVID-19. But, North Korea insists that it did not have any confirmed cases, and we do not have any evidence to deny North Korea's claims. At the same time, from the perspective of controlling infectious diseases, we can take note of some measures North Korea had taken, as we have seen that North Korea had closed its borders at a very early stage. If North Korea thinks that from the public health point of view, it is not ready to cope with the situation, then closing the border can be an efficient and effective way to control the disease and to prevent the virus from coming into and spreading in North Korea. Another one was that North Korea, at this time, had been emphasizing very much on the importance of personal hygiene — washing your hands clean with soap, and wearing your masks everywhere you go. So, precautionary measures — physically separating — and much emphasis on personal hygiene — I think these are two aspects that must have helped North Korea to successfully cope with the situation. I think some countries outside North Korea can also try to learn.

**Y: What were the impacts of North Korea's border closure due to COVID-19? What changes did the country experience economically, politically, and**



**socially, and how would that affect North Korea holistically in the near future?**

CBJ: As we have seen, North Korea took these measures at a very early stage of the outbreak. From the point of view of disease control. I think that must have contributed to the success, to a certain degree. However, there is another aspect; you know that North Korea has been under UN imposed sanctions for quite a long time and that all of these materials, including food and oil, are already in shortage. The international community was asking China to strengthen its control of the border with North Korea so that no smugglers of equipment or materials can be transmitted across the border. However, this time, North Korea closed the border on its own; before China took any measures, North Korea on its own decided to completely close its border for the sake of disease control. Some people are saying that the novel Corona virus has accomplished what the United Nations, or United States, trying to impose the sanctions on North Korea, which have failed so far. North Korea has already been under difficulties economically, but with COVID-19 and all these health measures, I think that North Korea's difficulties must have increased and the people must be undergoing a lot more of a difficult time in terms of food and oil shortages [as well as] some other health equipment shortages and so on. So, that is a toll for North Korea caused by this pandemic. The North Korean leader has reappeared to the public about one month ago after three or four weeks of absence from the public view. That was at the fertilizer factory, [where] he made the appearance after a three weeks absence. Fertilizer is for agriculture, and North Korea has been emphasizing that agriculture is the first frontline in fighting for economic development. So the food situation and the situation in agriculture must be a big issue for the North Korean leader; it means that North Korea is in some difficult situation with food and agriculture.

**Y: How might COVID-19 shape the role of North Korea in the future of international relations and leadership? Moving forward, is there a possibility that the perspective on the current Kim regime or North Korea, as a whole, can change (minimally or even drastically) when considering its generally "successful response," especially in the eyes of foreign powers?**

CBJ: As you said, North Korea reported no confirmed cases of COVID-19 to the World Health Organization, but as I said, we cannot be 100 percent sure that no reporting necessarily means there really have not been any COVID-19 cases in North Korea. Suspicion lingers that North Korea is not telling the whole truth, and because of these quite stringent measures of border closure and so on, its economic situation is quite dire — particularly in food and medical equipment. So, there is a positive side, but simultaneously, a negative side of what North Korea has been doing in coping with this pandemic situation. I think it is still too early to suggest that North Korea has been successful or that North Korea has been failing. I think we still have to see. If North Korea is really keen to gain respect from the international community, then North Korea should not isolate itself, but rather open up to the international community. Its development of weapons of mass destruction does not help North Korea in coming to better terms with the international community.

**Y: What are the possible short- and long-term impacts of this pandemic and the Kim regime and the Moon administration's response to it on inter-Korean relations as a whole?**

CBJ: Up until the end of last year, so before the outbreak of this COVID-19 pandemic, we have been discussing inter-Korean contact [and contact] between North Korea and the United States — how to reduce tension, how to establish permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula, and how we can achieve denuclearization. Early last year, the United States and North Korea had a summit meeting in Hanoi. After the failure and the impasse, both sides have been trying to find some way to accommodate each other's positions; we've been discussing this. That was the focus of what we'd been doing before the outbreak of COVID-19. But since the outbreak, all these efforts have been put on hold, so it was kind of suspended. That is the impact of the Corona virus on the overall situation on the Korean Peninsula. As soon as we come out of this situation, then we will try to be back on the track of this dialogue process. Even now, the South Korean government is trying to resume the dialogue with North Korea, and we are proposing to open some channels to discuss some health issues and disease control issues; we are waiting for some positive response from North Korea. The United States government also says that dialogue remains open, so they can come back to the process any time when they are ready. But you know that, now, the United States is moving towards its presidential elections in November. I think, maybe, they may think that it is not an opportune time to get back into the dialogue. We will see what happens.

**Y: Is there a clear way to distinguish whether COVID-19 is a crisis or opportunity for the Korean Peninsula? What are some important lessons to be learned from the pandemic as a whole and its impacts all around the world, and how do we overcome and move forward?**

CBJ: This COVID-19 *is* a crisis; it creates problems in every country, not just on the Korean Peninsula. You can see the global economy is down, and the countries are struggling to reopen it. The whole population is put on a kind of seize — in lockdown, having to stay at home. So, this is a crisis. But the Chinese character meaning "*crisis*" consists of two characters— one is *danger*, and the other is *opportunity*. So we can say that crisis comes with opportunities. This pandemic definitely shows that in order to secure the safety for mankind, people and countries should cooperate. So, cooperation and solidarity are what we need to cope with the threats to human security. Maybe this pandemic is not just a threat to mankind; we have other challenges as well— climate change, poverty, cyber security, and so on. We have many obstacles that no single country can manage alone. The COVID-19 crisis *is* a crisis that affects every aspect of our lives, but at the same time, it reminds mankind that you have to cooperate and unite to deal with the challenges. COVID-19 is a crisis, but comes with opportunities.