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Western view of North Korea “misguided,” expert tells Britannica

South Korean political scientist sees logic and consistency in Kim’s strategy

CHICAGO, December 8, 2010—The Western perception of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il as a loose cannon is “grossly misguided” says a leading South Korean political scientist in a new interview with Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Chung-in Moon, a professor at Yonsei University in South Korea, sees in North Korea’s nuclear program a consistent and rational strategy in pursuit of clear national interests.

“North Korea is seeking the nuclear path in order to secure a minimal nuclear deterrence against the United States,” says Moon in the interview, which is published today on the [Encyclopaedia Britannica blog](#). Moon interviewed North Korean leaders, who said they believed the United States might attack North Korea with tactical nuclear weapons.

In the wide-ranging discussion likely to puzzle American Korea watchers, Moon, the author of more than forty books and hundreds of academic articles, said that North Korea is falling behind South Korea in the conventional arms race and believes a nuclear arsenal will help compensate for this disparity. He also cites domestic reasons for North Korea to be seen as standing up to the West.

Western efforts to demonize Kim and characterize his regime as inscrutable, irrational or beyond diplomacy are wrongheaded and counterproductive, Moon thinks. “I am not taking North Korea’s side, but it is very important to analyze claims from both sides in an objective manner,” he says.

“Even though I’ve known Professor Moon for nearly 20 years, I was frankly surprised, in a good way, by some of the things he wrote, because they caused me to reevaluate my own perspectives,” said Britannica executive editor Michael Levy, a former student of Moon’s, who conducted the e-mail interview. “He sees North Korea and Kim Jong Il very differently from the way we do in the United States.

“Some Western, particularly American, observers may be tempted to dismiss Moon’s observations out of hand, but I think that would be unwise. He’s been watching the North up close for many years, and he knows what he’s talking about.”

Professor Moon is editor-in-chief of the journal Global Asia and was a special delegate to the summits between North and South Korea in 2000 and 2007. He has written several encyclopedia articles for Britannica about the political and economic affairs of the Pacific Rim region.

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