INTERVIEW WITH KIM DAE-JUNG

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Seoul, Korea

Interviewer
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Also present
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Riley: The other thing that I should mention before we begin is that our practice is to provide the people we interview a copy of the transcript for their review before we are free to make any use of it. That means that if there are areas that we decide to discuss today that you would like to re-visit, or that are sensitive and you would prefer not to have as a part of the public version of the transcript, then we can do that.

Do you have any memories of your first meeting with Bill Clinton?

Kim: Yes, in 1992 when I visited Los Angeles, I met the Los Angeles mayor at the entrance of the mayor’s building. I was about to enter the mayor’s office and Clinton stepped out of his office. I remember that we had a very good first encounter. At that time both of us were running for the Presidency, so we exchanged greetings and encouragement. He was aware of me; of course, I was more aware of Mr. Clinton. After that, when I visited Washington to meet Korean residents there, Mr. Clinton sent a lengthy message of encouragement to us.

Riley: This was after he was elected President?

Kim: Before.

Riley: Did you have any interaction with Bill Clinton or the administration in the period between 1992 and your election as President?

Kim: Not much in that period. After I was elected as President in 1998, I made a state visit to the United States. At that time at the state luncheon President Clinton made very complimentary remarks to me by saying that, “In our era we have our respective heroes, for example, President [Václav] Havel of the Czech Republic and President [Nelson] Mandela of South Africa, and there is President Kim Dae-Jung of South Korea.”

During the term, I met him seven times; after retirement I met him three times, both in Korea and the United States. During the Presidency and after the Presidency we remain as good friends who respect each other and who admire each other.

Riley: Of course.
Kim: I have very good and deep impression about President Clinton. It was 2000 when I participated in APEC [Asia-Pacific Economic Corporation], which was held in Brunei. President Clinton participated in that event as well, but it was his last official event. One day the APEC summit got together and had some dialogue. At that time President Clinton came in the room, but he also brought a paper and pen, and he made trips round the leaders and asked for signatures. It was like young students or children collecting signatures from sports stars or entertainment stars. When I was looking at him I felt that he was very innocent and charming. I also felt that I would not do as he did.

If you asked me to tell about him in one word, he is a man with an unpolluted soul and great zeitgeist, the spirit of the times. Also he has a warm heart for the victims of poverty and disease and disasters. He was always thinking about supporting those who are in need.

Riley: You come from an area of Korea that had been under-represented in national politics in Korea, and Bill Clinton came from a region of the United States, the South, that I think was in some ways similar. Did you feel that you had a special understanding of Clinton because of your origins in these particular areas of your countries?

Kim: Not really, but we shared the same perspective towards work. We have great interest in peace promotion and justice. So from the very beginning we were in the same accord, the same idea, so we respected each other, we cooperated with each other, and that continued from then on.

Riley: Did you feel that you were able to educate President Clinton about South Korea and North Korea? Is there always a concern among U.S. politicians that relying on a South Korean perspective will give you something that has a particular bias?

Kim: While we were running our respective governments about the Korean peninsula, the U.S. cooperation was very important, it really was critical. So we closely consulted each other about every aspect of the Korean matters, and we listened to each other. If there was anything that we had to adjust or correct, then we went through all the discussions and consultations. So in that regard, the close cooperation of the Korean peninsula was the case, the one word that can categorize it.

In June 1998 when I visited the United States as a state guest, I had a summit talk with the President. At that time President Clinton asked, “What is Sunshine Policy?” I answered that the people would have differing ideas, but the differing ideas can be resolved through dialogue, and the dialogue should be based on a mutual benefit basis, win-win. It is when the sun lays its warmth evenly to every person.

Riley: I’m sorry?

Kim: The sun lays the warm light to every person on an even basis.

Riley: Of course.
Kim: After that I explained my unification policy in great detail and he listened to me. Then he said, “I will support you. If you confront, I will back you from behind.” So we kept our dialogue exactly in a press conference later.

I was elected as President December 19, 1997. Just two days later, after my election President Clinton made a call, a direct call to me. At that time a crisis was looming very large because the dollar reserves remained only 3.9 billion dollars. So the Korean crisis might affect the world economy. It was a crisis. President Clinton made a direct call to me and he said, “A Korean problem, a Korean crisis may spread out to the world. So, President Kim, you have to address this matter very carefully and well.”

After that, the Under Secretary of the Treasury [David] Lipton visited me and we had a discussion. In the discussion I stated that I would fully support market economy and I would initiate the restructuring for the Congress and the Under Secretary. And he, the Under Secretary, was very happy about the discussion and he returned to his country. Soon after, the U.S. publicly announced that the country would support Korea.

Riley: Did you agree in that first conversation to the exchange of state visits? Your state visits came very quickly after you were elected, which I think is a sign of the importance of U.S.–Korean relations on both sides of the Atlantic, and I’m curious about how soon you agreed that there would be this exchange of visits.

Kim: In the direct call I don’t recall that I mentioned that I had to make all these state visits to the United States, but actually, the Korean government was hasty about making the state visit to the United States, because at that time the Korean crisis was looming very large and actually it was taking shape. We believed that the U.S. would be the only country that could help us to get out of the crisis. So I decided, I met with President Clinton and made a direct explanation to him.

As I said before, Under Secretary Lipton visited us and the U.S. government was satisfied with the actions that I had taken since his visit. After that I went to the United States and met with President Clinton and he gave me great encouragement. I expressed my appreciation for the U.S. support, and we were exactly the same accord on the matter. So we made an agreement that Korea and the U.S. had to work together to get Korea out of the economic crisis. So the early visit was motivated mainly by the urgency that Korea had to get out of the financial crisis.

Riley: So the financial crisis was the motivating factor for that original visit. Did you agree then that President Clinton would make a return trip to Korea to see you in Seoul?

Kim: He made a promise that he would pay a return visit. Actually, I visited the U.S. in June and he visited Korea in November.

Riley: Do you have any specific memories of either of your visits? You had been in the United States many times before. Had you been to the White House before this state visit in June of ’98?

Kim: Specifically I remember that I visited the White House, in particular the office in charge of security. I explained the Korean issues and had great dialogue with people in charge there.
We received your prepared question list and I would like to follow the order of the questions. After that, if you have additional questions I will entertain them.

**Riley:** [to translator] Of course, would it be better for me to go through the list or I can allow the President to address them as he has them if he would prefer.

**Kim:** [inaudible]

**Riley:** Very good, you had already said that your personal relationship with President Clinton was very good. Did you feel that President Clinton had a good understanding of Korean politics and especially the dilemmas that you faced in dealing with the North?

**Kim:** He remained with high interest in Korean politics and our issues. Clinton and I shared three great issues: one is North Korea nuclear issues, missiles; two is Sunshine Policy. The last one is how to overcome the financial crisis in Korea.

**Riley:** I also would like to ask you about your assessment of the high points and the low points of U.S.–Korean relations during the Clinton Presidency.

**Kim:** The low point is the moment when my predecessor was in charge. At that time the nuclear crisis in the North broke out. There were very differing ideas towards the Geneva agreement. The U.S. State Department expressed that it was a little bit difficult to handle the U.S.–Korea relationship at that time. Because of the differing ideas and opinions, the Korea–U.S. relationship was a little bit soured.

Since I became the President, the U.S.–Korea cooperation went very well, especially toward overcoming the economic crisis. Treasury Secretary [Robert] Rubin made complimentary remarks about Korea’s successful overcoming of the economic crisis. He said that the success of getting out of the crisis is not because of the United States or the IMF [International Monetary Fund], only because there was a heroic effort of President Kim Dae-Jung and his government. He mentioned a statement in the speech when he visited Korea and also in his book.

The second issue was the nuclear problem in North Korea. Both South Korea and the United States absolutely were against weapons of mass destruction. In order to resolve the nuclear crisis in the North, the United States dispatched coordinator [William] Perry. At that time the U.S. government was thinking about using the hotline policy toward North Korea, but I met with Perry for an hour and tried to convince him. My advisors also did the same. We said, “We have to pursue dialogue to resolve the crisis, and we are confident to do so.”

We also said that North Korea really wants to have improved relationship with the United States, so through the dialogue, if North Korea is assured of its security and can find any way it can revitalize its economy, then North Korea will be able to give up its nuclear weapons and missiles. But if something goes wrong, another war may break out on the Korean peninsula that may take millions of lives. This logic actually convinced coordinator Perry and President Clinton. After that, coordinator Perry made a report and sent it to Congress. He also said that the idea behind the Perry report was coming from President Kim Dae-Jung and his government people. So the North Korean nuclear issue was handled with full consultation and cooperation with the United States.
Another episode is when I visited North Korea, all the information was known to the United States. I went through all the discussions and consultations with the U.S. government. So all in all, on the North Korean issues we did not have any mistrust or suspicion between the two governments.

**Riley:** You approved of the Perry report? It reflected well your thinking about what needed to happen?

**Kim:** Exactly, my ideas were reflected in the Perry report.

**Riley:** One of the areas that apparently created some difficulty between your government and the Clinton administration was the area of lifting sanctions on the North. There were press accounts that indicated that President Clinton was unwilling in June of ’98 to wholly embrace your thinking about the need to lift sanctions. Can you say anything for our record about your conversations to try and convince the President to adopt your position, or what he told you about his need on this?

**Kim:** In June, 1998, I visited the United States. At that time I fully explained the Sunshine Policy and the Korean government’s approach to North Korea. In the meantime, before and after, I met with the U.S. Ambassador in Korea and also U.S. officials visiting Korea and tried to convince them. Also I met with Mr. Perry and we finally could reach full agreement in terms of North Korean issues. Once again I can tell you that during my term of five years I worked with President Clinton for more than two years. In every aspect, there is no single aspect that we have not reached an agreement. We are in full agreement, we had a full supportive relationship, and also we had full trust with each other—no suspicion, no mistrust at all between us.

**Riley:** I wonder in relation to that question about the influence of the Republican Congress on the administration and whether President Clinton’s domestic problems with the scandal in 1998 and 1999 had an effect on the President’s standing internationally, or if it in any way served as a distraction from the important issues that he had to deal with from the White House?

**Kim:** Out of the United States, people may not understand why the fuss is actually happening inside the beltway. The President has to be assessed whether he does politics well or not. It is not a matter of—politicians will not be determined by their attitude, it is a private matter. So that kind of thing would not be a matter of discussion at all. How many people in the world are free of that kind of affair or scandal, including us and people in the other countries? That would create a very big question mark in their mind why the United States is making a big fuss out of this.

In APEC in New Zealand in 1999 I asked President Clinton to see me in private and I said to him, “You must be going through a very difficult time, but to us in Korea that is nothing, that cannot affect your politics. A President should be determined by his or her achievement, not by private attitude. If that is the concern, then too many people cannot avoid any criticism. The prosecutor [Kenneth] Starr will not be free of those kinds of affairs even though he is dealing with a scandal, so don’t be discouraged by the event. I think that you made a great achievement as a President and history will remember you as a great President. World people are loving you and giving you great trust and credibility and you are already a successful President, so this
matter should not affect your great achievement as a President. So be brave. That is the advice that I can give you as a President, as a friend, and as an ally.”

Later I read President Clinton’s memoir, where he wrote that my encouragement and Nelson Mandela’s letter of encouragement to him were very helpful because these people are greatly respected in terms of morality and ethics.

**Male voice:** There is a private history of President Kim and President Clinton. During the APEC meeting, President Kim just took him aside and explained his situation privately. So we are very curious and cautious to open this with President Clinton.

**Kim:** This statement to me is okay, you can determine whether you can open it.

**Riley:** It will ultimately be up to President Kim. I know that you do oral history at your library, which has great value because the written record does not always reflect the important communications that go on between leaders. You know that far better than I do. That’s why these kinds of stories are very important to get onto the record, because otherwise future generations would not know about a discussions that I’m certain must have been extremely encouraging to President Clinton at an extremely difficult moment for him.

Do you have any other recollections of any other private conversations that you had with the President during the course of your time together that we ought to get onto the record, or was this the most important one to your mind?

**Kim:** In November of 1998 when he came to Seoul, he came with his brother, Roger Clinton. Roger Clinton performed on stage in Seoul. At that time President Clinton asked me to go with him to his brother’s performance. So I said yes, but the security team said that if the visit is known to the outside, that would not be very good and also the security staff could be a problem, so I did not go there. President Clinton went there alone. I was actually moved by the brothership between the two. If you think that this is a sensitive issue, then you may not disclose.

**Riley:** No, I think this is very good and very interesting. We are interested in not just the policies of the Clinton administration, about which you have a lot of knowledge, but also about the person who was President, as the people of Korea are deeply interested in the person who was their President.

**Kim:** In 2003 I was also retired and he was retired as well, he visited the Kim Dae-Jung Library here, and we talked about the inter-Korean issues and Korean peninsula in general. President Clinton at that time disclosed why he could not go to North Korea—he had made a commitment to me to visit there after 2000 when I visited North Korea. He explained that at that time the negotiations in the Middle East were going well between Palestinians, Arafat, and Israel. President Clinton said that he was going to Pyongyang; then Arafat said to please not to, and he made a commitment that he would deal with the Middle East issues peacefully and properly, if President Clinton would please not go to Pyongyang. He very strongly urged and asked him not to go, so President Clinton informed North Korea that his visit there was cancelled.

But in hindsight, the Arafat negotiation was not good at all. So the Middle East issue was not resolved. Also President Clinton could not visit Pyongyang—I am saying this in hindsight.
President Clinton at the time said to me that if he had gone to Pyongyang, or he could remain one more year in the Presidency, then he was fully confident they could resolve all the Korean peninsula issues.

Riley: So a missed opportunity in two cases, in the Middle East and in Korea.

Kim: In September, 1999, there was the APEC meeting in New Zealand, but at that time coincidentally, in East Timor there was a great massacre by a militia. The New Zealand APEC meeting was very timely considering the massacre occurring in the neighboring country. So in the APEC meeting I proposed to discuss the East Timor matter, but the host, the government in New Zealand, said the APEC is for economic matters, so the political issues should be ruled out in discussion.

In response I said that this is the gathering of the world leaders, but there is a massacre in the neighborhood. If you say that this meeting is only for the economy, that we will ignore this matter, then what would people call us as world leaders? We have responsibility. I met with President Clinton for that matter as well. I brought that issue to President Clinton and he said he was in full agreement with me. He suggested I meet first with President Jiang Zemin of China. I said I already met him but I didn’t get any response. Then President Clinton said that if that is the case, then you and I have to take the lead.

We met the Australian Prime Minister [John] Howard. So we three became the first to bring up this issue. We made a very strong appeal to the Indonesian representative when we met with the him. We said that Indonesia announced a democracy. If you continue, if you just ignore the militia’s massacre on the East Timor people, we will not just watch and sit idly. If APEC is not taking the issue as an official agenda because APEC is an economic body, then the people, the leaders who are agreeing with me will make a statement criticizing your practice in an individual capacity. We will do so, so please resolve the situation before we take action.

The negotiation and the discussion went on three or four hours. We also said that the militia that is doing the massacre is under your influence so you have to handle that. The Indonesian representative began contact with his government and around midnight the Indonesian government made an announcement that they will stop the militia’s massacre.

Actually, after the Indonesian government announcement, the massacre was stopped and East Timor officially received the moratorium on the massacre from the Indonesian government. Later the East Timor activist [José] Ramos-Horta, who became the President of East Timor later, came to Prime Minister Howard and President Clinton and said thank you, but they in one accord said that President Kim Dae-Jung of South Korea is the person you have to thank.

Because of this event I got moved one more time by President Clinton. APEC actually is an economic body, but Korea in the body has very limited responsibility compared to the United States, which is a huge country. But the President of the huge country stood up and decided to take the serious issue up front. So I was impressed by his determination and braveness and activeness and great interest. Without President Clinton’s determination at that time I may not have resolved the issue by myself. Ramos-Horta later made a statement; he came to us and said, “You saved 100 million lives.”
There was another episode when President Clinton came to Korea in November, 1998. It was the time when the first tourism ship from the South travelled to Kumgang Mountain. President Clinton watched this on TV and he made the comment that it is a unique and mystic and beautiful scene, and that North Korea should not miss this historical opportunity.

Riley: I had questions about differences, but it sounds from what you’ve said that there weren’t really major differences on the major issues related to Korea, so those questions I think I can probably skip. I wonder about Secretary Madeleine Albright’s trip to the North. Did you speak with her in advance or were you involved in the preparations for that trip in any way?

Kim: Before her visit to North Korea she visited me in Blue House. I had already visited North Korea on June 15, 2000. So I shared my experience with her. I said to her that I believed that her visit to the North would be successful because Chairman Kim Jong-il ardently wants to have improved relationship with the United States and he also believes the improved relationship will find North Korea a way to survive. I had told Chairman Kim Jong-il that their survival will be secured only through the United States, because the United States is the only country that can secure the security and economic revitalization. “So, Chairman Kim, you have to mend the relationship with the United States. If you do so I will help you.” When I said that, Kim Jong-il agreed with me.

So I told that episode to Madeleine Albright. I thought her visit to the North would be successful. I delivered my impression of Chairman Kim to her. I said that actually there were a lot of rumors about Kim Jong-il, people said that he was stupid and he is a cruel person, but when I met him he was a very normal person and he had very good judgment. If he thinks that the partner is a good dialogue partner, then Chairman Kim can open his heart so fully. So I told these kinds of things to Madeleine Albright for her information. If Chairman Kim regards you as a good partner of dialogue, then your dialogue will be very successful. Madeleine Albright came back to me after her visit and she said, “President Kim, your opinion was right.”

Riley: Were you surprised to find this out about Chairman Kim yourself? I didn’t have a question here about your trip for the summit in Pyongyang, but I wonder if I may ask you about your impressions, having been there because of the historical importance of that trip.

Interpreter: Not basically about Chairman Kim, but in general?

Riley: I’m watching the clock, and I understand that you don’t have all day, but I am curious about this because there probably was no more historic development in the last two years of the Clinton Presidency than this summit. Clinton is only a tangential figure in that, but I thought since I am here, I would ask about your trip to Pyongyang.

Kim: When I looked at Pyongyang, the city itself was decent but there were many houses that turned off lights in the evenings and the roads were very dim, not bright enough. It means that the North Korean economy is not in a good state. I had little opportunity to meet with civilians because I had an official visit there, but when I left from the Pyongyang airport to my destination, on the street 500 people were standing there with flowers and screaming welcome. Chairman Kim said that they are the people who welcome you. I understand that those people are
most of them mobilized people, but that fact testifies to the fact that North Korea felt my visit was important.

When I met with Chairman Kim I felt that he has very rich knowledge and common sense and also a very accurate sense of judgment. Once he is convinced of something, he made an instant decision immediately on the spot. Basically he is a dictator, so he will be different from other leaders. My general impression is that he is a very normal person and is a very capable leader. I met him on three occasions, first at the airport, the Changjin Airport. The second was the dinner that I hosted, and third was the luncheon that he hosted. On the three occasions he brought all the members of the Defense Committee, and he asked them to take a bow to me and pour their glasses in toast. That means all the military in North Korea paid a tribute to a commander of an enemy state. That is very significant.

Riley: Of course. I know we’re very short on time. I’d like to ask one more question. I get the impression that the Korean relationship with the United States doesn’t succeed as well after President Clinton leaves office as it did when President Clinton was in office, that the politics of his successor were not as favorable as they were under President Clinton. I wonder if I could get you to comment on your general sense about the Clinton Presidency in history as an ally to South Korea.

Kim: President [George W.] Bush adopted the “Anything But Clinton” policy. About North Korea he reverted all the achievement of the Clinton administration to the other way. So we had great difficulties with the Bush administration. With the Bush administration’s hard-line policy toward North Korea we had some consequences. For example, North Korea gave up the membership of the NPT [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty] and expert IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] inspectors. Also North Korea fired missiles which were under moratorium before. Finally, in October 2006, North Korea did a nuclear test and became a nuclear state. All in all, Bush’s North Korean policy ended in great failure. Before President Bush said that he could not have a dialogue with bad guys, with bad people, but now he began the dialogue with North Korea and started reciprocity through the dialogue. Last Autumn when I met with President Clinton we said that President Bush returned to our policy, that means we were at least successful on the Korean peninsula issues when we were in our administration. Also, we shared, we welcomed Bush’s turnaround in terms of North Korean policy.

Riley: Exactly.

Kim: Actually I am not in a position to assess the eight years of the Clinton administration, but generally, if I am allowed to make a comment, during the eight years he was loved by the world; he enjoyed very much love from the world people and also he elevated the international profile of the United States. He made a good impression about the United States in the world. The world also became more favorable toward the United States. In that regard, President Clinton made a great, great contribution.

Domestically he also made a great achievement of resolving all the financial deficits. Also he took care of isolated people all the time. So as a President, President Clinton was very successful and he will be remembered as a great President in U.S. history.
Riley: And also in Korea?

Kim: One more thing, I watched the State of the Union address by President Clinton. At that time I saw all the members of Congress, regardless of their party affiliation, make a standing ovation. It was great. And also, I have never seen a person who delivered a good speech like him.

Riley: Gentleman, was there any piece of this that I omitted that I should have covered in his preparation?

Male voice: You have covered most of it.

Riley: I wish to express my sincere gratitude for your time. It is extremely valuable. I know that the people at the Clinton Foundation would also want me to express their gratitude. I make an attempt through these interviews to project what people in the future would want to know and it’s a very difficult chore, but you’ve made it very easy for me today by dealing with the core issues of this relationship in such a sincere and personal way. I’m grateful to have the time and to have the opportunity to come and meet with you and talk about these things, so thank you.

Kim: Actually it is my pleasure and my honor to let the next generation know about my dear and respected friend, President Clinton.

Riley: Thank you.