



The 20th Anniversary of June 15th South-North Joint Declaration – Implications and Possible Measures to Improve Inter-Korean Relationship Peaceful Unification

Dr. PARK Jongchul

*Senior Research Fellow,
Korea Institute for National Unification
(pic@kinu.or.kr)*

The Second Article of the June 15th South-North Joint Declaration is the First Agreement Between the Two Koreas on the Unification Plan

After the division, North and South Korea went into a fierce debate on a unification formula to secure the legitimacy of the unification issue. The South's proposal of "National Community Unification Formula" and the North's "Koryo Confederation System" are composed of different elements on its philosophy, vision, goal, process and others. The second article of the June 15th South-North Joint Declaration is significant in that the North and the South sought for mutual ground on unification plan formally for the first time. The two Koreas pursued to overcome differences in unification plans and institutionalize coexistence and cooperation.

The second article of the June 15th South-North Joint Declaration states clearly that "Acknowledging that there are common elements in the South's proposal for a confederation and the North's proposal for a federation of lower stage," and so "the South and the North agreed to promote reunification in that direction." Through this article, the North and South officially acknowledged that an intermediate stage is necessary considering the difference between the two Koreas before discussing the final goal of reunification.

South Korea has been emphasizing of a gradual, step-by-step unification in consideration of the relationship of confrontation and mistrust and the massive costs of hasty unification. There is a consensus in South Korea on the importance of transitional period within the unification process.

Since the late 1980s, North Korea recognized difficulties in the idea of North-led unification. Thus, it claimed a need of lower level of coexistence of both states and put off institutional unification to the next generation. A series of the collapse of so-

cialist states brought security threats to the North Korean regime. And so, the North sought a measure to institutionalize the coexistence of the two Koreas as an alternative to ensure the survival of its regime.

North Korea re-introduced the loosely formed Koryo Confederation System, which it proposed in early 1990s, as “a federation of lower stage” in the June 15th Joint Declaration. The North explained that this form of federation is based on the principle of “one nation, one state, two systems, and two governments,” and the two regional governments in North and South will separately take charge of the political, military, and diplomatic rights. The difference would be a superior organization of national unification, which exists to uniformly adjust the North-South relations to promote the common interests of the nation.

Since then, North Korea has struggled with combining of an intermediate stage of unification and a federal system. For instance, the North explained in 2002 that the June 15th Joint Declaration pursues the direction of unification with federation system. Also, it added that the “federation of lower stage” does not mean that the two countries have fully agreed on the unification plan, but rather that they decided to seek unification through actively recognizing the commonalities of each side’s formula. In July 2014, the Kim Jong Un regime publicly re-named the loose form of federal system or the federation of lower stage as a “federal union system.”

The Possibility of North Korea's New Unification Plan

In 2019 New Year’s address, Chairman Kim Jong Un expressed his interests in unification plan by saying that “North and south should not pass up the favorable atmosphere of today when all the nationals’ interest in and aspiration for reunification are growing unprecedentedly, but actively try to find a peaceful reunification plan based on nationwide agreement and direct sincere efforts to this end.”

At the time in 2018, North Korea was expanding its diplomatic ties through the Inter-Korean summit, the North Korea-U.S. summit, and the North Korea-China summit, and was considering internal and external environment favorable to North Korea. In addition, by highlighting the unification plan “based on nationwide agreement,” the North was clearly putting an emphasis on the unification front strategy with the principle of national unity. Furthermore, it can be said that North Korea sought to abolish the United States’ hostile policy against the North, enhance the peaceful image of North Korea, and improve the friendly image of the North to the South Korean citizens by stressing that it is trying to “find a peaceful reunification plan.”

Overall, North Korea has preemptively suggested the unification plan in a situation where North Korea-U.S. negotiation for denuclearization, discussion on the transition to a peace regime, and the process of inter-Korean relations were in progress

simultaneously. Through these actions, North Korea intended to take the initiative in North Korea-U.S. negotiations and inter-Korean relations.

However, after the “No-deal Hanoi Summit” in 2019 between North Korea and the U.S., the dialogue of the two has stalled and a progress in inter-Korean relations has stopped. At the end of 2019, North Korea declared a “new path” to the strengthening of nuclear deterrence and self-reliance. Moreover, the North Korean economy is expected to be facing serious difficulties due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019). Given the circumstance, it seems more plausible for North Korea to focus on a survival strategy to overcome economic difficulties rather than to suggest a new unification plan. North Korea's emphasis on the “our-state-first principle” reveals that its focus is placed on the status of a normal state, survival, and development rather than unification.

An Emphasis on Practical Unification through Peace and Cooperation

At the moment, it is more desirable for North and South Korea to realize the idea of coexistence and co-prosperity through peace settlement and cooperation than to discuss a shared unification plan. Before discussing about a unification formula, it is necessary to gather wisdom on definite tasks and measures for denuclearization, a transition to a peace regime, and the improvement of inter-Korean relations.

Unification is not a goal that can be achieved in a moment. It is a result of a long journey toward peace and prosperity. It is significant at first to establish peace and accomplish reunification in peaceful means. The two Koreas need to seek a practical reunification on the basis of already institutionalized inter-Korean cooperation system that would be formed through peaceful coexistence.

For peaceful coexistence, North and South Korea should start by acknowledging and mutually respecting the systems on the both sides. To this end, mutual trust is essential since it is a foundation for the two Koreas to coexist with different ideologies, values, and political and economic systems. Continuous efforts to reduce tensions and conflicts could build the trust.

Also, it is necessary to arrange legal and institutional systems to develop peaceful coexistence in a stable manner. While establishing an institutional framework, procedures, and norms for inter-Korean relations by signing an additional basic agreement, North and South Korea should devise agreements on the settlement of peace on the Korean Peninsula, economic affairs, and socio-cultural affairs to develop a systematic and sustainable inter-Korean relations.

When the North and the South succeed in creating a mutually beneficial framework for economic and socio-cultural exchange on the basis of law and institutions, a foundation for coexistence can be formed. If the two Koreas abide by the principle of

peaceful coexistence and symbiosis, a genuine unity can be achieved as peace and prosperity intersect and bring synergies. One needs to step away from being consumed with the form of unification as a final result. Preferably, a long-term vision for gradual integration and convergence of South and North Korea is essential. ♣

※ *Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.*

※ *This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.*