

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

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Twenty years ago in June 2000, President Kim Dae-jung of the South and Chairman Kim Jong-il of the North held the first inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang and signed a historical document, the June 15th South-North Joint Declaration. Major points of this document is as follows:

- 1) Resolve the question of reunification independently through joint efforts of the “Korean people.”
- 2) Acknowledge that there are common elements in the South’s proposal for a “confederation” and the North’s proposal for a “federation of lower stage” as the formula for achieving reunification, and promote reunification in such direction.
- 3) Promptly resolve humanitarian issues such as exchange visits by separated family members and relatives and the issue of former long-term prisoners who had refused to renounce communism.
- 4) Consolidate mutual trust by promoting balanced development of the national economy through economic cooperation and by stimulating cooperation and exchanges in civic, cultural, sports, public health, environment and all other fields.
- 5) Hold a dialogue between relevant authorities in the near future.

Since this Joint Declaration, the Inter-Korean summits were held very frequently, and the volume of the separated family exchange visits increased more than 100 times compared to the past of the summit. Also a zone for a win-win cooperation, in which South Korean entrepreneurs and North Korean employees work together, was created in the Kaesong area where originally military units were stationed.

The spirit of the June 15th South-North Joint Declaration was succeeded and developed by the “October 4th South-North Joint Declaration” signed by President Roh

Moo-hyun and Chairman Kim Jong-il at the 2nd Inter-Korean Summit in 2007. The October 4th Declaration went step ahead to discuss security cooperation issues, such as ending military hostilities, establishing a peace regime on the Korean peninsula, and resolving nuclear issues through mutual cooperation, which were not specifically addressed in the 2000 Inter-Korean Summit. Quite a bold agreement that goes beyond the Cold War thinking, such as the establishment of the “Special Zone of Peace and Cooperation in the West Sea,” was also included.

Unfortunately, the June 15th Declaration and the October 4th Declaration, especially the article related to the unification issues of the June 15th Declaration brought an intense debate between the conservatives and the progressives in the South Korean society. Many experts of the conservatives in the South regarded the Kim Dae-jung administration as being entangled in North Korea’s policy as the two Koreas agreed to resolve the unification issue “independently” by joining forces of “Korean people.” These experts also criticized that the Kim administration accepted North Korea’s proposal of federal system by admitting that there is a commonality between the South’s “confederation” and the North’s “federation of lower stage.” As a result, the spirit of the June 15th Joint Declaration was no longer succeeded in the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administration, and the agreement soon became hollow.

The agreement to resolve the unification issue within “Korean people” in the June 15th Declaration signifies that the North has departed from the confrontational view of the Cold War era when it perceived the South as an “American Puppet.” Moreover, a reference to the middle stage of the unification process (“confederation” and “federation of lower stage”) was able to be included in the Declaration as Chairman Kim Jong-il agreed with President Kim Dae-jung’s claim to approach the unification issues not radically but rather progressively and realistically.

Before the adoption of the June 15th Declaration, North Korea considered the South Korean government to be the target of overthrow and subversion, taking the position of “unification first, exchange cooperation later.” Yet, as President Kim Dae-jung and Chairman Kim Jong-il agreed to approach the unification problem gradually in the long term at the 2000 inter-Korean Summit, North Korea shifted the policy to “exchange cooperation first, unification later.”

In October 2000, North Korea added details to the concept of “federation of lower stage,” which it used at the June 15th Declaration. Within the explanation, North Korea used the term “National Unification Organization (민족통일기구)” instead of “central government” and “North and South government (북과 남의 정부)” instead of “autonomous regional government.” If governments of two Koreas establish a National Unification Organization, as the North described, while maintaining the current functions and powers of the state, such as political, military, diplomatic powers and more, this organization cannot be in the form of a federal government but rather an econom-

ic or socio-cultural community. However, the proposal of South Korea for inter-Korean union stressed the establishment of inter-governmental consultative group, such as inter-Korean Presidential Summit, inter-Korean Ministerial Conference, inter-Korean Council, etc., and not a community group. Therefore, it should be considered that the South's "confederation" proposal and the North's "federation of lower stage" proposal are not contradictory but complementary.

The spirit of the June 15th Declaration and the contents of the October 4th Declaration have creatively succeeded and developed to Panmunjom Declaration on April 27 and Pyongyang Joint Declaration on September 19, 2018. Through these declarations, President Moon Jae-in and Chairman Kim Jong-un reached a more concrete agreement related to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, establishment of a peace regime, mitigation of military tensions, and inter-Korean cooperation.

However, as the Hanoi Summit in February 2019 terminated without results, inter-Korean relations started to deteriorate again. Furthermore, North Korea recently sent a strong message against the act of certain groups of North Korean defectors for scattering anti-North leaflets, and declared to cut off all communication lines between the two Koreas. Kim Yo Jong, the first vice department director of the Central Committee (CC) of the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK), highlighted that the work toward the South should shift into "the one against enemy (對敵事業)" at the review meeting of all departments related to South Korean affairs, which was held on June 8, 2020. And yet, such transition of inter-Korean relations into the hostilities as it did during the Cold War era will only bring unfortunate consequences for both countries. If it returns to the past belligerent relationship, the two Koreas will enter an endless arms race and, as a result, both governments will not be able to secure sufficient budget for the welfare.

If North Korea is holding grudges against South Korean authorities as First Vice Department Director Kim Yo Jong mentioned in her statement, it is wise for both parties to gather as soon as possible to discuss plausible solutions. In fact, North and South Korean authorities may have difficulties of converging their stances on certain topics. Nevertheless, it is essential for the two groups to hold face-to-face meeting and openly discuss about possible areas of cooperation and mutual benefits. This signifies the spirit of national reconciliation that the June 15th Declaration proclaimed and what the two countries must continuously uphold.

All communication lines that have been cut off must be swiftly restored. Meetings between leaders, authorities, and civilians of the South and the North should be frequently held in Panmunjom, Pyongyang, Seoul, and other places. The two Koreas should refrain from entering into ceaseless arms race and regime competition, which will only bring destruction to the both. Two countries can first cooperate in areas such as public health and quarantine, and extend the horizon to other spheres that benefit

both parties. Regarding sensitive issues, including nuclear weapons, missiles, and the ROK-U.S. joint military exercises, the leaders and envoys of the South and the North should meet again to frankly exchange ideas, find middle ground, and closely communicate for the cooperation with neighboring countries. As we greet the 20th anniversary of the June 15th South-North Joint Declaration, South and North Korea should move forward together with the spirit of national reconciliation. ♣

※ *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.*