



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

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The atmosphere in marking the 20th anniversary of the June 15th South-North Joint Declaration is quite unusual. This ambience is quite different from the year 2000 when the June 15th South-North Joint Declaration was drafted, as well as the year 2018 in which an expectation of a new momentum of the inter-Korean relations increased as the two Koreas overcame the brink of war in 2017 and devised the Panmunjom Declaration. The inter-Korean relations began to be strained in 2019 and have discontinued all dialogue and exchanges over the last year. On the occasions for this historical celebration, the spirit of the June 15th Declaration is being instead replaced with bitter words. Apart from the joint inter-Korean events, the inter-Korean hotline has been cut off. The two symbols of inter-Korean exchange projects, joint inter-Korean compilation in Gyeoremal Keunsajeon (Unabridged and Unified Korean Dictionary) and the restoration of the excavation of Manwoldae in Kaesong, have also been suspended since 2018.

Socio-cultural exchanges are aimed at resolving the inter-Korean relations and laying the foundation for inter-Korean communications, which have become disparate since the division of the peninsula. Socio-cultural exchange programs operated in 1985 for the first time after the division of the nation, and the relevant projects have become an integral symbol of promise and trust toward the future. Socio-cultural exchanges have developed covering diverse fields following the June 15th Summit in 2000, and have become an important asset for the continuation of the inter-Korean relations.

However, there were also limitations. The major limitation was the failure to establish an institutionalized framework which has resulted in the future path of socio-economic projects to be determined by political situation, not by its original purposes.

Despite various limitations, socio-cultural exchanges have been a major area which both the North and the South mutually agreed at inter-Korean talks since the division

of the peninsula. Through socio-cultural exchanges, the differences between the two Koreas were identified and the possibility of reciprocal communication was found. As both parties agreed on the meaning of socio-cultural exchanges, the relevant cooperation was mentioned ever since the “Inter-Korean Basic Agreement.” On article 16 of the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement, the two Koreas agreed to conduct “exchanges and cooperation in various fields such as science and technology, education, literature and the arts, health, sports, environment, and publishing and journalism including newspapers, radio and television broadcasts and publications.” This document also explicitly mentions diverse exchange cooperation projects including free correspondence, visits of dispersed family members, opening of sea and air transport routes, and connection of rails and roads to realize free communication and personal exchanges. In this aspect, socio-cultural exchanges became the essential symbol of all inter-Korea’s exchanges and cooperation happening outside the political and economic fields.

Socio-cultural sectors started to get on track in the year of 2000. In the June 15th Joint Declaration, the two sides agreed on “stimulating cooperation and exchanges in civic, cultural, sports, health, environmental and all other fields.” The October 4th Joint Declaration in 2007 has further elaborated and crystalized the articles by stating, “The South and the North have agreed to boost exchanges and cooperation in the social areas covering history, language, education, science and technology, culture and arts, and sports to highlight the long history and excellent culture of the Korean people,” and added “the South and the North have agreed to carry out tours to Mt. Baekdu and open nonstop flight services between Seoul and Mt. Baekdu for this purpose (Article 6).” The development of the socio-cultural exchanges which have begun since the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement was also reflected in the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration in 2018.

The lack of trust is the fundamental reason for the two Koreas’ inability to move forward in the relations, despite the sharing of the meaning of socio-cultural exchanges and realizing several joint agreements. The structural foundation of mutual trust that holds up the inter-Korean relations is highly vulnerable. The June 15th South-North Joint Declaration in 2000 was a historic declaration in which the two Koreas mutually declared to end hostilities and move toward a new relationship. However, a lack of trust basis in relationship could not sustain this historical and symbolic significance of the summit, which held for the first time since the division of the peninsula.

With the division of the nation, the two Koreas have developed hostile interdependence amidst persistent tensions and conflicts. The two Koreas have turned their internal problems to the outside world and antagonized each other, and also used each other to consolidate power. It was good for the two Koreas to cooperate peacefully, but there was nothing much bad about not doing so. It was also an ace in the hole that can be used any time during internal and external political crises. Hence, the

new inter-Korean relations should be formed as a normal and reliable relationship, not the relations used on a political purpose. This new relationship should aim for eliminating uncertainties on the Korean Peninsula.

The year of 2020 marks the 20th anniversary of the first inter-Korean summit and the 70th anniversary of the Korean War. The Korean War happened seven decades ago, and the first summit was held two decades ago. This means it took five decades for the two Korean leaders to face each other. For twenty years since the 2000 Inter-Korean Summit was held, inter-Korean relations have undergone ups and downs. Today is the result of the past history and the cause of tomorrow. Past history is a guidebook on how to design and move forward for the future of the Korean Peninsula. However, at each time regime changed in South Korea, its North Korean policy switched accordingly. Then, the new government had to face the North in new relations with new policies. Likewise, a new policy was promulgated every time with a change of administration. Such practice cannot build trust. Trust is a process. Inter-Korean relations over the past two decades have proved the fact that good processes lead to good results.

Now, history is asking us again what will happen to the Korean Peninsula in 20 years. The issue of the Korean Peninsula cannot be handed to anybody. The future of the Peninsula should be created by the two Koreas, who are the directly involved parties. We need an objective perception of reality and future-oriented ideas to design the Korean peninsula for peace and prosperity.

South Korea's international prestige has been elevated this year with the world-leading tackling of the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019). It has demonstrated South Korea's capability to overcome the crisis through mature democracy and voluntary cooperation from its citizens than any other country in the world. The credibility from the international community has been strengthened as well. It has raised the status of South Korea to an advanced country that sets world-leading examples of tackling of the crisis. The Koreans' DNA, which have transformed a crisis into an opportunity throughout the past, has this time raised the national prestige by promoting K-Quarantine models to the world following the Korean Wave.

In line with South Korea's elevated prestige, the Korean Peninsula agenda should be examined differently now at the global level and be looked beyond the inter-Korean level. The future of the Korean Peninsula calls for a bold change. Based on the peace on the Peninsula, South Korea should nurture and foster its imagination of becoming a center of the world history that connects the continent and the ocean. We must review what the choices of the past history have realized today's South Korea. Several ambitious attempts such as the end of the night curfew, liberalization of overseas travel, opening up of Japanese culture, introduction of five working days, and reduction of labor hours, have been implemented to realize what we take for granted today.

At the time, such attempts were also perceived as something extraordinary.

History does not just go by for even a second. As the June 15th Joint Declaration in 2000 has served as an opportunity to transform the inter-Korean relations, we must create peace and unification on the Korean Peninsula with new imagination and practice. In other words, we must create the current relations, imagining peace on the Peninsula after 20 years. The new inter-Korean relations starts from building trust. The two Koreas should establish the principles of keeping what has been promised rather than proposing something new. ❖

※ 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.