

[Column]

Korean Peninsula: The end of reunification?

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The only way to save Korean reunification is through an end to the new Cold War between east and west

Photo: Im Jong-seok, the chief of staff under President Moon Jae-in speaks at an event marking the sixth anniversary of the signing of the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018, held at the Kim Dae-jung Convention Center in Gwangju on Sept. 19, 2024. (Kim Young-won/Hankyoreh)

The dream of Korean reunification is now over 80 years old. This year, the notion that the two halves of the Korean Peninsula could be stitched back together has become so feeble that it entered hospice.

The children of this dream of reunification are responsible for putting it into the intensive care ward.

The northern child, now in its third generation of leadership, has decided that it's not worth pretending that reunification is even real. It is in the process of writing reunification out of the DPRK's constitution and now considers North Korea to be a "separate socialist state." It tore up a military agreement with the South. It has destroyed the infrastructure of reunification, including the Arch of Reunification in downtown Pyongyang and train tracks near the border that could have relinked the two countries. It has even removed "tongil," the Korean term for reunification, from the names of train stations. It has already written the epitaph for the dream of reunification.

The other child in the south has conflicted feelings. The former chief of staff in the liberal Moon Jae-in administration caused considerable controversy recently by proposing that the two Koreas "live separately."

On the face of it, the current conservative government of Yoon Suk-yeol continues to promote reunification, most recently in a new doctrine articulated in mid-August's Liberation Day commemoration. In reality, however, Yoon's approach stresses not a joint effort to construct a single state but unilateral steps made by South Korea, which is an indirect acknowledgment of North Korea's abandonment of its own dream of reunification. Moreover, Yoon's approach amounts to reunification by absorption, preceded by regime change in the North.

The absorption scenario is nothing new. The two Koreas went to war with one another in the 1950s to reunify the peninsula by military means. After the war and into the 1960s, the two Koreas were ideologically far apart but structurally quite similar. The two economies were on par. The two political systems, after South Korea's brief experiment with democracy in 1960-61, were equally authoritarian. Culturally, too, the two countries were relatively compatible, for they were nationalist and concerned with self-sufficiency. Despite ideological differences, the two Koreas could have reunified during this period.

When South Korea chose globalization as a path out of underdevelopment, the two halves of the

peninsula began to diverge. The South Korean economy grew by leaps and bounds. It eventually threw off authoritarian rule. And South Korean culture became evermore international in spirit. North Korea, meanwhile, chose relative isolation and nuclear weapons.

Thus did reunification become more of a dream than a feasible project. How on earth could a rich, democratic, cosmopolitan country unite with a poor, authoritarian, parochial one?

At the end of the 1990s, Kim Dae-jung had a simple answer to this question: slowly. His dream of reunification involved a slow-motion effort to harmonize relations between north and south, which imagined economic progress in the north accompanied by some degree of political liberalization and cultural engagement with the rest of the world. According to the “sunshine policy,” the sunlight of benevolence would persuade North Korea to shed its protective coat and breathe more easily.

Subsequent conservative leaders, however, have taken a considerably more confrontational approach, replacing the “sunshine policy” of Kim Dae-jung with something akin to a “take-it-or-leave-it” policy. Park Geun-hye and now Yoon Suk-yeol have criticized the reunification policies of their liberal predecessors as giveaways, as forms of appeasement. They have brandished very big sticks and dangled only the smallest of carrots.

For North Korea, liberals and conservatives in the South have both been wrongheaded. The North Korean leadership has never appreciated being treated as a charity case or the weaker partner in the relationship. The political elite is obviously not interested in liberalization or regime change or exposing the population to the unpredictable currents of global culture. The DPRK has lucrative relations with China and now, increasingly, with Russia. It doesn't need lectures from South Korean politicians.

For almost 50 years, it was quite obvious that the two Koreas had become very different and very difficult-to-unify countries. In the last decade, however, it was becoming obvious that even the two countries' dreams of reunification had become incompatible as well. Korean nationalism, expressed in the phrase “tanil minjok” or “one people, one blood,” might be expected to overcome political, economic, or cultural differences. But even nationalism is different on either side of the DMZ. The North Korean variant is the survival kind: us against the rest of the world. The South Korean version has been tempered by the experience of globalization: us with the rest of the world.

The “sunshine policy” of the 1990s was made possible because of the end of the Cold War and the decision by Russia and China to end the export of subsidized energy to North Korea. The precipitous rise in energy costs led to North Korea's agricultural and industrial collapse. Reunification was not so much a dream at that moment but a lifeline, with South Korea potentially stepping into the role of fiscal sponsor.

Today, North Korea has turned back to its Cold War strategy of playing Russia and China off one another to secure the best deal. South Korea, under liberal or conservative rule, can't compete. South Korean conservatives dream of regime change and absorption of the North along the lines of what happened in Germany. South Korean liberals dream of a trial separation during which North Korea comes to its senses and wants back into the relationship. North Korea has no intention of reviving any dream of reunification under those terms.

The only way to save reunification from the usual outcome of hospice is through perhaps an even more unlikely scenario: an end to the new Cold War between east and west.

The United States and China need to find common ground on climate issues, Middle East peace, and containing North Korea's nuclear ambitions. And the United States and its allies have to force Russia

to abandon its imperial ambitions in Ukraine and elsewhere. Only in a world where Russia isn't importing North Korean weapons and China isn't keeping North Korea afloat economically can South Korea again become a useful partner for North Korea. Only if reunification can once again become a concrete reality of inter-Korean trade and cooperation — which benefits both sides — will the age-old dream of one Korea become reinvigorated.

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P.S.

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