

[Column] Korean reunification: Between idealism and realism

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A suggestion that Seoul give up on reunification has sparked criticism and debate



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)



Chung-in Moon, James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University

“Let’s not reunify. Wouldn’t it be better for us to just live separately, respecting and helping one another and being happy together? Let us build a solid peace and leave the future of the Korean Peninsula after that to later generations. Let us accept the objective reality and the existence of two states. Let us either strike or amend the territorial terms

in Article 3 of the Constitution.”

These remarks were made not long ago by former Blue House chief of staff Im Jong-seok. Their impact has been considerable.

Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon derided Im for “echoing Kim Jong-un’s ‘two hostile states’ frame” and “going beyond mere ‘sympathies with the North’ to outright allegiance.”

Park Choong-kwon, a National Assembly member who himself defected from North Korea, went so far as to accuse Im of being a secret agent “supplying a pretext for the legalization of North Korea’s ‘two hostile state’ frame.” President Yoon Suk-yeol personally singled Im’s remarks out as an “anti-constitutional idea,” asking whether he was suggesting that it was “even possible to have two states coexisting peacefully in a situation where North Korea has declared its willingness to wage a nuclear attack.”

Even other progressives and members of the Democratic Party have voiced fears that Im was getting too far ahead of things, suggesting that his idea of abandoning the goal of reunification and coexisting as two states showed a disregard for popular sentiment and was potentially contrary to the Constitution.

Without a doubt, Im’s remarks come across as extreme. But it is also clear that they are not too far off from the current reality of the Korean Peninsula.

First, let us consider his call to abandon the goal of reunification. That does not seem much different from the “Korean community” unification formula of 1989, which served as a key element of unification policies under past administrations.

The Korean community unification plan consists of three stages, including a first one that involves seeking out reconciliation, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence between South and North and a second intermediate one that involves constructing an inter-Korean confederation to create a situation of de facto unification, where people and goods are able to move freely between the two sides.

Under this framework, the final stage is institutional unification into a single nation-state, where after the two sides have restored their homogeneity under a basic order of liberal democracy, the decision is made through peaceful means such as a referendum.

In other words, Im’s “let’s not reunify” message is less an expression of opposition to reunification per se than a deeply ironic way of describing reunification that takes the practical constraints into consideration.

The same can be said for his “two states” frame. After the adoption of the Korean community unification plan, South Korean administrations clearly indicated that this would be a two-state system, with one nation but two states, two sets of institutions, and two governments.

While the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement of 1991 referred to their relationship as “a special interim relationship stemming from the process towards unification,” it is also true that since their simultaneous admission to the United Nations that same year, the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea have clearly existed as two sovereign states.

Indeed, the sort of inter-Korean confederation that past South Korean administrations have proposed is premised on the idea of a union among states, along the same lines as the European Union. This alternative conception stemmed from consistent characterizations of the Confederal Republic of Koryo unification plan proposed by the North — with its system of one nation, one

state, and two sets of institutions and local governments — as being a “Trojan horse” aimed at achieving unification under a communist regime.

In late December of last year, Kim Jong-un fully abandoned the idea of a confederation, calling instead for a system with two nations and two hostile states along the same lines as East Germany. As a reason for this, he stressed that “reunification can never be achieved with the ROK authorities that defined the ‘unification by absorption’ and ‘unification under liberal democracy’ as their state policy” and that “north-south relations have been completely fixed into the relations between two states hostile to each other and the relations between two belligerent states, not the consanguineous or homogeneous ones any more.”

In this light, the system of “one people in two peacefully coexisting states” described by Im is more of a continuation of the stepwise unification approach adhered to by past South Korean administrations. What it cannot be seen as is an answer to the course chosen by Kim Jong-un. We also cannot overlook the issues that Im raised about the territorial terms in Article 3 of the South Korean Constitution.

At a Supreme People’s Assembly meeting in January of this year, Kim Jong-un directed the amendment of the North Korean constitution with the addition of new territorial land, water and airspace provisions that would redefine the scope of territory where sovereignty would be exercised. If these territorial definitions are put in place and implemented, they would inevitably run into conflict with Article 3 of the South Korean Constitution.

The reason that this provision was established in the first place was to legitimize the Republic of Korea’s status as the sole lawful government on the Korean Peninsula. In no one’s eyes can it be seen as effectively legally binding; if anything, it increases the likelihood of a conflict erupting. This is why it warrants careful examination.

In view of all this, what Im was suggesting was that we set aside our “unification idealism” and seek out practical solutions that clearly take reality into account. At the same time, his approach of “progressive realism” carries with it a number of issues that would need to be dealt with.

North Korea appears very unlikely to accept his call for peaceful coexistence, and the Yoon Suk-yeol administration is similarly unlikely to revise its aim of achieving reunification through a northward expansion of liberalism. Given all the issues surrounding North Korea’s nuclear program, it is difficult to even imagine how a space for discussing peaceful coexistence could be created.

But hopefully the controversial questions that Im has raised can go some way in bridging the gap between reunification idealism and realism.

Please direct questions or comments to [english@hani.co.kr]

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