



IFES Issues and Analysis - NO.92 [2020-04] June. 12, 2020

The Current Significance of the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration and Our Next Steps



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There is a saying in Korea that “even rivers and mountains change in 10 years,” but this does not seem to be the case for inter-Korean relations. The leaders of the two Koreas changed history when they met on June 15, 2000 because they put aside fears of heading down the untrodden path long obstructed by the Cold War and mutual hostility. That meeting led to the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration and the shift to a new precious era of “peace.” Twenty years following that day, however, the future of the Korean Peninsula and inter-Korean relations looks uncertain. North Korea responded to the sending of leaflets over the border by activists from the South by shutting down all lines of communication with South Korea, including the hotline between the two Korean leaders. North Korea also emphasized that it would henceforth regard South Korea as an “enemy.” North Korea’s initial response to the leaflets has been to close down all channels of dialogue with South Korea and it has suggested that additional measures could involve pulling out of the September 19, 2018 inter-Korean military accords.

The June 15 North-South Joint Declaration marked the start of a new era between the two Koreas; since that time, however, their relationship has seesawed between progress and setbacks and much of the significance of the joint declaration has become either forgotten or distorted. The two Koreas are faced with either heading into a future focused on reconciliation, peace and prosperity by ending 75 years of confrontation and conflict in 2020. Alternatively, they could return to a past full of mistrust and hostility. It is important for us to rationally focus on what issues exist between the two countries and find sensible ways to resolve them. Below, I reflect on the significance of the June 15 inter-Korean joint declaration with a view to present what direction inter-Korean relations should take and a broader vision for the two country’s relationship.

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The June 15 North-South Joint Declaration’s most significant achievement was focused on the concept of “peace.” Twenty years ago this month, the two leaders of the Koreas met for the first time as part of a process to better understand each other and build political trust. They firmly agreed that another war must never occur on the Korean Peninsula. The agreement they made included measures to reduce national security threats on both sides and decrease the possibility of unintended clashes between the two Koreas. This had the effect of relaxing military tensions on the peninsula. The October 4 Declaration, the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration, the June 12 US-DPRK Joint Declaration, and the September 19 Pyongyang Declaration were all aimed at bringing about peace on the peninsula based on promises made by the leaders of both countries. The Moon Jae-in administration’s “Korean Peninsula Peace Process” worked to put these agreements into action. The September 19 Inter-Korean Military Accords, which was essentially a renunciation of war by both countries, are now facing a myriad of difficulties; however, the two Koreas have continued to make efforts to implement these accords.

The environment and framework to restart the peace process between the two countries remains intact despite the fact that the “Korean Peninsula Peace Process” is no longer making much progress. The worsening of inter-Korean relations that we are currently witnessing has damaged

the discourse focused on “peace”; in fact, the worsening in ties between the two countries may lead to a crisis on the peninsula that is qualitatively different from the past. If additional unfavorable circumstances occur?particularly given the abnormal conditions we face due to the COVID-19 pandemic?the inter-Korean relationship could face even more difficulties and retreat to an even harsher state of affairs. Given these circumstances, we must focus on establishing a solid and sustainable foundation focused on bringing about peace based on the framework provided by the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration. Such efforts should begin with the full implementation of the September 19 Inter-Korean Military Accords. On top of this, we must focus on efforts to create a “New Korean Peninsula System” that can provide a new catalyst to bringing about peace on the Korean Peninsula. The “New Korean Peninsula System” will be made up of two pillars?a peace cooperation community and an economic cooperation community?that will allow interaction between the two Koreas on political, military, and economic issues. When the wheels of economic cooperation begin to roll on a road paved by reduced military tensions and trust-building, the era of confrontation, conflict, ideology, and “taking sides” will run its course and the path toward perpetual peace will appear in front of us.

The improvement of inter-Korean relations will require us to consider the perceptions and influence held by the international community. The current Sino-US relationship has moved into a state of strategic conflict in 2020 and is showing clear signs of heading down the path of prolonged hostility and competition. The continuation of inter-Korean conflict provides the potential for disputes between the two superpowers to explode on the peninsula given that they focus only on their own country’s interests. The Korean Peninsula could thus become the center of dispute between the two superpowers; this, of course, does not help us create the conditions and environment for peace to prevail. In such a situation, the central facets of the “New Korean Peninsula System”?the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the building of a peace system?could become even more difficult. It is now time to consider the changes that have taken place in international relations over the past 20 years along with those that have impacted the environment that surrounds the Korean Peninsula. We must link these changes with the spirit of the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration as we move forward. North and South Korea must establish a peace system through creative, sustainable, and independent efforts aimed at improving their relationship amid the strategic competition between the US and China.

“Excelling One’s Teacher by Taking Lessons from the Past to Find a Guide for Tomorrow.”

One Korean saying that exemplifies the future path the two Koreas must follow is this: “Excelling one’s teacher by taking lessons from the past to find a guide for tomorrow.” The leadership in both Koreas must remember the past 20 years and return to its origins to make a courageous decision about inter-Korean relations. The small steps forward the two countries were able to make despite a myriad of difficulties were all possible because of the solid foundation built by the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration. The tentative possibilities of exchange, cooperation, and dialogue provided by the joint declaration must be used as lessons for the future. Only solidarity and cooperation can resolve the issues of international sanctions, coercion, and the breaking of ties. Any slowdowns in progress to improving relations will only deepen confrontation and conflict between the two Koreas.

I sincerely hope that the two Koreas will take the courageous step to move toward change and cooperation in memory of the 20th anniversary of the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration.

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