

## **The futility of wishful thinking on North Korea**

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North Korea has re-emerged as a hot-button topic after a liberal politician openly suggested South Korea accept the North as a separate state entity and renounce the goal of reunification for a peaceful co-existence. The debate calls for a sober reckoning on how we should address North Korea in contemporary times. In doing so, we must keep three conditions in mind.

First of all, a heated discussion on North Korea, the inter-Korean relationship and unification can end without any substance if it is exhausted on “wishful thinking” and neglects the equation of force. Peace can never be achieved simply by praying for it. Korea didn’t lose its sovereignty to Japan because its hope for independence was insufficient. Peace arrives to those who have the strength to defend themselves against invaders. If the dynamics of force are left out in politics, prescriptions can be misguided by idealism.

In personal relationships, we can expect our goodwill to be returned to some extent. But that cannot be expected in intergovernmental relations. Strengthened deterrence against North Korean threats is a must for peace, not a stumbling block.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un inspects a production facility for “weapons-grade nuclear material” in early September, the Korean Central News Agency reported on Sept. 13. [YONHAP]

Secondly, the argument that peace can result by assuring the North that we have given up on unification is fundamentally flawed. The fact that Pyongyang has reached its limits in its governance style and regime is the cause of the crisis in the Korean Peninsula, not our agenda on unification. As long as the regime sticks to its rigid state control and dictatorship with disregard for market principles, North Koreans will have difficult lives and their disgruntlement will only escalate. The fact that their free-willed neighbors across the border live 30 to 40 times richer than them is a threat to North Korean leadership. We will pose as a source of dread to the North no matter how many times we emphasize that we have little thought on reunification or are happy with the two-state status quo.

The peaceful solution would be trying to bring the North to our eye level — instead of us going down to meet their’s — while maintaining our deterrence capabilities. Surrender is not an answer to a peaceful path. We should not compromise our values and principles of democracy, freedom and human dignity that

make up our identity as the world's 12th largest economy. We must persuade North Korea to incrementally move toward our direction.

Abiding by the rule of “principled rapprochement” cannot be easy. Still, if we forgo our principles, we will lose our identity as well as international legitimacy and backing for our policy on North Korea. At the same time, if we give up our “engaging endeavors,” we will lose the force of gravity to anchor integration and peace because inter-Korean relations will be torn apart and wrecked.

Lastly, we must never forget that the North Korean issue is an international matter although we are directly involved. North Korea has come to pose as a serious security threat to Washington since Pyongyang began developing inter-continental ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads to U.S. territories. Restricting the North Korean issue to a bilateral — not international — context is a serious misjudgment.

The North Korean issue cannot be solved without improvements in the relationship between Pyongyang and Washington no matter how well the two Koreas get along. The relationship between Pyongyang and Washington also hinges on the vibe between Seoul and Washington. The heyday of the inter-Korean relationship was from 1998 and 2000 when the Kim Dae-jung and Bill Clinton administrations were close. To expect Washington, strongly pitted against Beijing, to improve its relations with Pyongyang to bring more stability to the Korean Peninsula while we keep to neutrality to balance our diplomatic capabilities can only be a selfish idea, as diplomacy always works based on the give-and-take mechanism.

So, what exactly can be done today? We must steadfastly guard our values and principles and buttress our capacity to deter North Korean provocations while seeking dialogue to prevent unwanted outcomes. Instead of wasting our resources on rhetorical and unproductive debate over unification, we must quietly yet staunchly build up our capabilities to accommodate a peaceful unification. What use is unification if we can't bear it?

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