



Online Series

2023. 07. 10. | CO 23-17

The Kim Jong Un Regime Does Not Have a Reunification Policy?

Suh, Bo-hyuk (Research Fellow, Peace Research Division)

This article assesses whether the Kim Jong-un regime has a reunification policy and evaluate it in light of continuity and change. To that end, this paper utilizes North Korea's state media reports and Kim Jong-un's statements. The analysis shows that there has been continuity in Kim Jong-un's reunification policy, although no change was observed. In fact, interest in reunification has diminished significantly. Instead, reunification is found to be often associated with other North Korea's policy goals, such as sovereignty, prosperity, and peace, or is often limited to propaganda for the purpose of legitimization of the regime. This phenomenon seems to have been influenced by the conditions facing North Korea as well as the attitudes of Kim Jong-un and the power elite toward reunification.

Background

On the 51st anniversary of the issuance of the July 4, 1972 Joint Statement, neither side, South and North Korea, has commented on it. In North Korea that has emphasized the implementation of inter-Korean agreements, it is noticeable that the supreme leader or the authorities barely mention its reunification policy. On July 4, 2023, the front page of *Rodong Sinmun* featured a "report from the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)" calling for "reaching 12 important milestones for people's economic

development." There was no mention of the July 4 Joint Statement in the paper. Into the decade with Kim Jong Un in power, scholars with specialty in North Korea have evaluated the Kim Jong-un regime's policies on the economy, military, human rights, and inter-Korean relations, but its reunification policy has rarely been discussed. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to assess whether the Kim regime has a reunification policy and, if so, identify what it is. To this end, the author utilized the North Korean state media and the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU)'s 'Kim Jong Un's Public Activity Report Analysis Database.'

Data Analysis

First, the author found 73 articles on "reunification" from the *Rodong Sinmun* and KCNA between 2011 and 2022, and extracted 257 sentences in which "reunification" was mentioned. The author then matched the context in which reunification was described with 20 related words, and found that the most common terms were: nation, 150 times, fatherland, 117 times, sovereignty, 88 times, peace, 87 times, and prosperity, 63 times. The findings demonstrate that the meaning of reunification in North Korea goes beyond simply unifying the two Koreas, but is linked to a variety of values or goals. Specifically, first, the term "nation" not only refers to its original meaning, one Korean people, which encompasses South Koreans, North Koreans, and Korean expatriates, but also to the two Koreas, North Korea as a whole, its sympathizers in the South, and the North Korean system. Second, "fatherland" carries two meanings: it can refer to one Korean people, including the two Koreas, or it can refer to North Korea as a socialist system. Third, "sovereignty" is the first principle of the *Juche* ideology and North Korea's internal and external policies, including reunification policy. It also refers to peace and cooperation. Fourth, "peace" is defined in both a general sense and in relation to reunification, and is also defined in terms of both ends and means in combination with reunification. However, there exist contradictions between the two, such as achieving peaceful reunification through non-peaceful means. Fifth, "prosperity" refers to the development of North Korean society or the joint prosperity of North and South Korea, but the meaning of prosperity

appears only limited to the realm of economic development.¹⁾

Such findings indicate that, at least in North Korea, reunification has been used as a way to implement policy goals and ideologies pursued by the DPRK, such as development, security, and sovereignty, rather than in the sense of reunification per se, such as reunification of the two Koreas or national reunion. Of the five meanings of reunification stated above, prosperity may seem to be at the bottom of the list of Kim's interests, but given North Korea's structural and chronic underdevelopment and isolation, it is arguably Kim Jong-un regime's top concern. Sovereignty is often used as a propaganda term to justify North Korea's challenging situation, and peace is interchangeable with security.

Next, "Kim Jong Un's Public Activity Report Analysis Database" published by KINU covers articles on Kim Jong-un's "public activities" featured in *Rodong Sinmun* and KCNA over a 10-year period (January 1, 2012 to May 20, 2023). The database, which contains a total of 1,704 articles, covers Kim Jong-un's public activities in addition to local tours, including (troop) inspections, guiding and observing drills and exercises, guiding, attending, and observing various meetings.²⁾ In this DB, there were only two articles related to reunification when classified by the article title, but they were assessed to be not that significant.

The 'Kim Jong-un Public Activity Report Analysis DB' contains mostly articles related to Kim Jong-un's domestic politics. You can find how frequent Kim Jong-un's articles appear by searching for articles in this database for each year. The author examined the articles related to the five terms involving "reunification" discussed earlier, and found that many articles were associated with three of the five terms (sovereignty, motherland, and prosperity).

In 2012, when Kim Jong-un's activities were in full swing after Kim Jong-il's funeral, there were 1,666 occurrences of the mentioning of the "people," being placed at the 6th of the list of frequency of the database, 1,094 occurrences of the term

1) Bo-hyuk Suh, "A Critique of the Kim Jong Un Regime's Reunification Discourse," *Border Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Shinhan University, South Korea: 2023) (forthcoming).

2) Korea Institute for National reunification, Kim Jong Un's Public Activity Report Analysis Database, <<https://www.kinu.or.kr/nksdb>> (accessed July 3, 2023).

"construction" in the 13th place and 908 occurrences of the term "fatherland" in the 18th place. In 2016, when Kim Jong-un took over as Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea and Chairman of the State Affairs Commission, there were 2,406 articles on "people" ranked at the 7th, 1,766 articles on "factories" ranked at the 8th, 1,723 articles on "construction" ranked at the 9th, and 1,492 articles on "production" ranked at the 12th. In 2018, the year of the inter-Korean, North Korea-US, and North Korea-China summits, there were 1,077 articles on "people" placed in the 6th place, 953 articles on "construction" in the 7th, 819 for "factory" in the 9th place, 749 for "country" in the 12th place, 732 for "production" in the 13th, and 609 for the "state" in the 14th; and in 2022, there were 1,270 articles for "people" in the 3rd place, 1,066 for "construction" in the 5th, 864 for the "state" in the 8th, and 613 for "development" in the 11th.

These results illustrate that the Kim Jong-un regime is focused on economic development under the banner of "Our State First" and "Believing in the People as in Heaven," and that the regime strives to bolster public support and mobilization to that end. As shown above, terms such as reunification and nation are rarely found in the database related to Kim Jong-un's public activities. Instead, terms related to development and prosperity, such as construction, production, and fatherland, dominate the top 20. This dismisses the notion that reunification discourse in North Korea has been used internally to consolidate power and create a sense of unity among the population. There has also been a marked decline in interest in reunification under Kim Jong-un. These two data show that the maintenance of the North Korean system, centered on economic development, is the regime's primary concern.

Assessment and Implications

One might ask, what is Kim Jong-un's reunification policy? The official statements made by the supreme leader at the highest level institution might provide a clue to this question. Under Kim Jong-un, the Workers' Party Congress, which had not been held since 1980, was held twice, followed by Kim Jong-un's reunification-related remarks.

On May 8, 2016, Kim Jong Un publicly addressed the issue of reunification when he issued the Decision of the 7th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea – On the Performance Assessment of the Works of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea. "The authorities of the DPRK should abandon the illusory dream of 'institutional reunification' and reorient themselves to the realization of a federal system of reunification as declared at home and abroad," Kim Jong-un said, adding that "the three principles of national reunification, the June 15 Joint Declaration and the October 4 Declaration are the common national outlines that should be consistently followed in advancing North-South relations and resolving the issue of national reunification." In other words, the Kim Jong-un regime reiterates its existing position of implementing the reunification plan formulated by its predecessors and the inter-Korean agreement without a separate reunification policy. This can be called a continuation of North Korea's reunification policy under Kim Jong-un, but it cannot be said to be his own policy.

At the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (Jan. 5-12, 2021), Kim Jong-un also mentioned the reunification issue in his "Report on the Works of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea." An article in *Rodong Sinmun* (January 9, 2021), referring to Kim's report, pointed out that "the dream of reunification has become more distant." Kim Jong-un's comments reflect "our party's unwavering stance to ensure the eternal peaceful stability of the Korean Peninsula and advance the historic feat of national reunification by relying on our powerful national defense." In other words, Kim Jong-un has strongly stated that he will push reunification aside as an immediate goal and instead prioritize security based on nuclear power.

Kim Jong-un's statements on reunification, made twice at the country's most authoritative venue, Workers' Party Congress, indicate that he does not have a reunification policy of his own. While Kim Jong-un has praised the "reunification precepts" of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il at every opportunity, he has failed to offer his own reunification plan. The 2018 Panmunjom Declaration (April 27, 2018) and the Pyongyang Joint Declaration (September 19, 2018), which he was involved in, do not contain any new reunification discussions and do not place a higher emphasis on reunification compared to the June 15, 2000 North-South Joint Declaration.

Under Kim Jong-un, North Korea's reunification discourse has taken on a variety of meanings and is deeply connected to the country's internal goals, including politics, economics, and security, as well as its reunification policy. This is a continuation of the reunification discourse during the Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il regimes. In 2018, in a peaceful mood, Kim Jong-un agreed to two inter-Korean summits, but it is questionable whether he is committed to reunification, given that he sent a letter to Trump emphasizing the importance of U.S.–North Korea relations. It is also worth noting that the 7th Plenum of the Party Central Committee in April 2018 adopted the "line of concentrating all efforts on building a socialist economy," which suggests that Kim's series of summit diplomacy in 2018 was aimed at stabilizing the regime rather than creating a foundation for reunification.

In the end, the reunification policy under Kim Jong-un is characterized by continuity, and there have been no signs of change. The conditions facing the North Korean regime suggest that reunification has taken a backseat to policy priorities. However, it is also worth examining the extent to which Kim Jong-un and the power elite are interested in reunification. When North Korea recently rejected Hyundai Group Chairman Hyun Jeong-eun's request to visit North Korea, it was its Foreign Ministry, not the reunification Department, which responded to that request. What does it say about the Kim regime's preference for "Our State First" over "Our People First"? This is a topic worthy of in-depth discussion. ©KINU 2023

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).