

## Online Series

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# Significance and Necessity of Establishing a ‘North Korean Defectors’ Day’

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On January 16, 2024, President Yoon Suk Yeol directed the Ministry of Unification to allocate a day for the commemoration of North Korean defectors during State Council. What rationale underlies the proposal to designate a day specifically dedicated to acknowledging North Korean defectors, and what symbolic weight does it carry?

### **A Pathway to Enhance North Korean Human Rights and Achieve Ethnic-Based Peaceful Unification**

Firstly, within the context of inter-Korean relations and unification strategies, this initiative holds profound significance as it can serve as a conduit for enhancing North Korean human rights and fostering a peaceful reunification grounded in shared ethnicity. The denunciation of the concept of shared ethnic identity by the North Korean Workers’ Party during the 9<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting of the 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in December 2023, followed by the abandonment of the notion of peaceful unification, underscores the historical complexities.<sup>1)</sup> Notably, during the policy speech delivered

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<sup>1)</sup> *Korean Central News Agency*, December 31, 2023.

on January 16, 2024, during the 10<sup>th</sup> Session of the 14<sup>th</sup> Supreme People's Assembly, Kim Jong-un mandated the formulation of pragmatic measures aimed at eradicating remnants of historical symbols associated with “consanguineous or homogeneous inter-Korean relations” and “peaceful unification.” He emphasized the need to completely remove the concepts of ‘unification, reconciliation, and fellow countrymen.’<sup>2)</sup>

Despite the directives from the supreme leader, notwithstanding intensified control and measures and penalties enforced by new legislations, and notwithstanding stricter policies on education, the shared ethnic identity nurtured over seven decades cannot dissipate overnight. Therefore, North Korean Defectors' Day should convey a resounding message that the residents of North Korea, being of the same lineage, are entitled to freedom, human rights, and prosperity akin to their counterparts in South Korea, thereby distinguishing between the North Korean authorities and the North Korean residents. Events to raise awareness regarding the dire human rights conditions endured by North Korean residents should be organized. Additionally, it is imperative to convey the message that the fundamental resolution to the North Korean human rights issue lies in peaceful unification under a liberal democratic framework.

### **Upholding Responsibilities in Safeguarding North Korean Defectors Abroad and Promoting the Special Inter-Korean Relationship**

Secondly, the commemoration of North Korean Defectors' Day holds significance in fulfilling our constitutional mandate to safeguard North Korean defectors overseas and in disseminating the notion of a special interim relationship between South and North Korea to the global arena. The advancement of facial recognition technologies and the implementation of a new anti-espionage law in China have significantly impeded the mobility of North Korean defectors within its borders. Despite international concerns, China persistently engages in the forcible repatriation of North Korean

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<sup>2)</sup> *Korean Central News Agency*, January 16, 2024



defectors. Therefore, North Korean Defectors' Day should be utilized as a platform to strategize and execute initiatives aimed at raising awareness about the human rights situation of North Korean defectors overseas and rallying the international community to address this pressing issue.

North Korean defectors must be protected as they are South Korean citizens by the Constitution. Unlike North Korea, which has declared inter-Korean relations as those between two different states and abandoned the goal of unification, South Korea upholds the 'special interim relationship stemming from the process toward unification' and advocate for peaceful unification. By emphasizing our commitment to and maintenance of the spirit of the 1991 Agreement, we must constantly spread and build international consensus on peaceful unification.

Recognizing North Korean defectors as South Korean citizens by virtue of the Constitution underscores a stark contrast with North Korea's stance, which delineates inter-Korean relations as those between separate states and renounces the pursuit of unification. South Korea, on the other hand, advocates for a "special interim relationship stemming from the process toward unification" and champions the cause of peaceful unification. By emphasizing our commitment to and maintenance of the spirit of the 1991 Agreement, we must constantly propagate and cultivate international consensus on the imperative of peaceful unification.

### **Enhancing Settlement Assistance for North Korean Defectors and Promoting National Cohesion**

Thirdly, the celebration of North Korean Defectors' Day bears domestic significance, providing a platform to bolster settlement assistance for North Korean defectors and foster national cohesion. Despite the implementation of the "North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act," persistent challenges surrounding settlement support for North Korean defectors remain. The designation of North Korean Defectors' Day necessitates a systematic identification of institutional deficiencies in settlement support mechanisms and their consistent enhancement. At the same time, events to raise public awareness of North Korean defectors must be organized and



reflected in the relevant policies.

In effectively navigating challenges and provocations by North Korea, it is imperative to unify the hearts and minds of the entire populace. North Korean defectors and the general public must coalesce as a unified entity. Strengthening the settlement support system for North Korean defectors and fostering public consciousness are essential for ensuring the social, psychological, and emotional integration of both North Korean defectors and the general public. Furthermore, comprehensive assimilation of North Korean defectors into South Korean society as citizens of the Republic of Korea will foster a more favorable perception among residents of North Korea towards South Korea. ©KINU 2024

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