



DPRK's "Two Koreas" Rhetoric and ROK's Global Pivotal State Vision

Ihn-Hwi PARK (Professor, Ewha Womans University)

Since early 2024, South Korea (ROK) has encountered an unprecedented situation—it is no exaggeration to call this a significant milestone in the history of the divided peninsula, as North Korea (DPRK) has officially adopted the “two Koreas” rhetoric. Although DPRK has always advocated for the separate existences for the ROK and DPRK, this marks the first time the regime has hinted at a policy direction for inter-Korean relations that diverges completely from the previous unification policy. Setting aside the logical flaws in DPRK’s claims, the sole reason Kim Jong Un, who was 28 years old at the time, ascended to power was because he was the grandson of Kim Il Sung and the son of Kim Jong Il. In this context, it seems almost reckless for him to abandon his grandfather’s and father’s “dying wishes” to prioritize unification, as their accomplishments and legacy are his most significant political assets. This is why many predicted that the “two Koreas” rhetoric was a strategic move to later reveal Kim’s true intentions. However, when North Korea abolished the term “Day of the Sun” for Kim Il Sung’s birth anniversary, which had been celebrated as the nation’s biggest holiday, domestic and foreign experts on North Korea began to recognize the seriousness of this rhetoric.

Now, numerous individual experts and research institutions are striving to understand DPRK’s “two states” rhetoric, and their assessments generally fall into three categories. First, the North Korean regime aims to fundamentally obstruct the unification policy of the ROK government. The regime has expressed deep concern about the spread of South Korean culture within DPRK, even enacting the “Law on Rejecting Reactionary Ideology and Culture” in 2020. By intensifying hostile relations with the ROK and promoting the idea of two “separate” countries, the regime seeks to block ROK’s influence on a new level while neutralizing any related efforts from the ROK government from the outset.

Secondly, the existence of two hostile states, North and South Korea, increases the likelihood of the logical use of nuclear weapons. More specifically, North Korea has enhanced its deterrence capability against the military superiority of the U.S. and South Korea not by actually using nuclear weapons, but by refining the theoretical framework for their potential use.

Thirdly, the “two Koreas” rhetoric reflects North Korea’s intention to solidify its diplomatic position by leveraging instabilities in international security, such as the Russia-Ukraine War and the crisis in the Middle East. By showcasing its close ties with China and Russia, North Korea aims to weaken the security structure in Northeast Asia while bolstering the foundation of the DPRK-China-Russia trilateral partnership. In its relations with China and Russia, North Korea’s independent status, separate from South Korea, can alleviate diplomatic pressure on China and Russia, ultimately expanding the space for North Korea’s survival.

Interestingly, after a prolonged period of silence, North Korea is reportedly inviting Western diplomats to the country and re-opening its embassies abroad since the end of last February. Notably, the North Korean Embassy in Berlin has officially resumed its activities, marking North Korea’s return to the diplomatic stage, starting with European countries. Consequently, the international community, now re-engaging with North Korean diplomats, will be more curious about its “two states” rhetoric. This will, in turn, heighten the South Korean government’s sense of responsibility and efforts to counter North Korea’s new foreign policy direction. Similarly to how South Korea considers 1995 under President Kim Young-sam as the year of globalization, it could be interpreted that North Korea has set this year as a North Korean version of “Global Choson,” despite the awkwardness of the term.

On June 19, Vladimir Putin visited Pyongyang, where he and Kim Jong Un held a summit. This visit marked the first time a Russian leader had visited North Korea in 24 years. They signed a comprehensive strategic partnership treaty that reportedly included an “automatic military intervention” clause. This enhancement of relations is widely seen as tantamount to a military alliance between the two countries. Additionally, while the likelihood is lower than earlier predictions this year, Xi Jinping may also visit North Korea. In this context, it is crucial to seriously consider the impact that changes in North Korea’s unification policy will have on Northeast Asia.

Fundamentally, the assertion that Northeast Asia has entered a “new Cold War” is weak. Above all, unlike during the Cold War era, the significant disparity in national power between North and South Korea today means that the concept of competition inherent in the term “Cold War” no longer applies to their relationship.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider the perspectives of those concerned about a new Cold War. Given the persistent instability in international security, North Korea will likely continue to exploit this instability to maximize its own national security. Therefore, a logical, academic, and political solution addressing the implications of the “two Koreas” rhetoric on Northeast Asia and the international community as a whole is urgent.

Despite the significant achievements of the current South Korean government, exemplified by the ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation, it is difficult to deny that this has inadvertently created an opportunity for North Korea to strengthen its ties with China and Russia. Furthermore, Russia’s demand for North Korea’s conventional weapons has increased amid its war against Ukraine. China likely views the strategic value of North Korea as more attractive for enhancing its leadership within the international community, where it emphasizes partnerships among the Global South. In short, North Korea’s “two Koreas” rhetoric ultimately aims to increase its diplomatic autonomy by maximizing hostile relations.

The South Korean government’s “Global Pivotal State” vision is rooted in its exceptional economic growth and democratic development within Asia. Observing South Korea’s high status in the international community, North Korea seeks to distance itself further from South Korea through the “two state” logic. Given the importance of the Korean Peninsula issue in both regional and global contexts, there is a pressing need for the international community to seriously consider the “Korean Question,” similar to how it addressed the “German Question” in the past.

For instance, the Yoon Suk Yeol government should evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the Northeast Asia policies pursued by previous governments and make diplomatic efforts to increase regional interest in inter-Korean relations. Emphasizing the Global Pivotal State initiative and its Indo-Pacific Strategy does not imply that South Korea will marginalize countries with different governance systems. Given the complex nature of the Korean Question, it is crucial to prioritize discussions on Korean Peninsula issues within the Northeast Asian or East Asian context.

While highlighting South Korea’s national identity in the political and economic realms and engaging neighboring countries as diverse stakeholders in the Korean Peninsula issue, the South Korean government should actively leverage the ROK-U.S. alliance and develop comprehensive strategies. Ultimately, the South Korean government bears a significant responsibility to garner strong international support for the unification of the Korean Peninsula.

- **Ihn-Hwi PARK** is a professor of the Division of International Studies at Ewha Womans University.

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

“DPRK’s ‘Two Koreas’ Rhetoric and ROK’s Global Pivotal State Vision”

Date of Issue: 2 July 2024 979-11-6617-771-2-95340

Typeset by: Jisoo Park

For inquiries:
Jisoo Park, Research Associate

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 208) jspark@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
Sajik-dong 261, Jongro-gu,
Seoul 03028, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr