

4 The Yoon Suk Yeol Government's Unification Consensus-building Policy: Challenges and Tasks

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Abstract

This paper outlines challenges facing the Yoon Suk-yeol government's policy to broaden a public consensus on unification as well as policy recommendations for responding to these challenges. This paper identifies three challenges—the post-truth phenomenon at the global level, North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons at the inter-Korean relations level, and poor policy infrastructure at the domestic level. The common thread underlining these challenges is their deepening of disconnection within our society. Policies designed to facilitate a broader consensus on unification should therefore institutionalize communication mechanisms to overcome generational and political disconnection, disconnection from reality, and disconnection among the government, experts and the public. To this end, this paper suggests three policy recommendations. First, social dialogue should be expanded based on an institutional foundation that ensures sustainability and efficiency. Second, it is necessary to establish policy infrastructure that enables the utilization of a policy framework rather than a project framework when pursuing policies for expanding a unification consensus. Third, unification research infrastructure should be reinforced. Lastly, this paper underscores the significance of communication in building a public consensus on unification.

※ 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).

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THE historian Arnold Toynbee viewed the success or failure of civilizations from the perspective of challenges and responses. This perspective differs little when it comes to the success or failure of a country's policies. Policies that establish clear goals and successfully respond to challenges will meet with success. This paper will identify the challenges confronting the Yoon Suk-yeol administration's policy of broadening a public consensus on unification, and seek to identify the direction in which responses should be made.

Challenges of Broadening a Public Consensus on Unification

One of the challenges at the global level is the post-truth phenomenon. By definition, the post-truth phenomenon refers to the fact that personal belief and emotion are more influential than objective facts in shaping public opinion. This is the phenomenon President Yoon referred to in his inaugural speech of "choosing to see only what we want to see and hearing only what we want to hear." *Global Trends 2040*, published by the U.S. National Intelligence Council in March 2021, predicts this post-truth phenomenon as persisting over the next two decades and emerging as a major factor in generating fragmentation and conflict at the individual, social, national and international levels.

The post-truth phenomenon may be understood as the paradox of connectivity. Although the scope of information and choice has expanded following technological advancements that strengthen interconnection between individuals, the information and choices that are actually selected have narrowed. According to the post-truth phenomenon, individuals living in a hyper-connected society seek out only information that fits their worldviews, ideologies and perspectives, which in turn reinforces the beliefs they already have or aspire to hold. In addition, like-minded individuals establish exclusive networks and form public opinion while rejecting others with different views. One can easily predict the future direction of public opinion on unification if such opinion is shaped by a combination of 'South-South conflicts (ideological fights between the conservative and the progressive in South Korea) and the post-truth phenomenon. If liberals and conservatives continue to connect only with those on their side and thereby reinforce the very beliefs they aspire to hold,

misunderstandings and hatred will intensify.

In terms of inter-Korean relations, North Korea's emergence as a nuclear power has become a challenge in building a broader consensus on unification. The political and military implications of North Korea's nuclear possession and capabilities have a great influence on policies related to North Korea and defense. However, Pyongyang's existence as a de facto nuclear weapons state has not greatly influenced discussions on creating a national consensus on unification. Discussions on unification tend to focus on the future of inter-Korean relations, including how many people aspire to achieve unification, what benefits unification will bring, and why unification should be achieved. Indeed, it is rare that current events on the Korean Peninsula are viewed from the perspective of unification.

In this context, discussions on unification in our society have yet to move beyond the framework of unification discourse and discussion in the past when the North did not possess nuclear weapons. While academic studies related to unification such as preparations and the associated costs of unification have considered elements of North Korea's nuclear weapons program, they still cannot be applied to the current situation in light of Pyongyang's new status as a de facto nuclear weapons state. The Unification Plan for One National Community is also at odds with today's reality. The unification plan has not sufficiently taken into account the meaning of North Korean denuclearization, or whether inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation can proceed in parallel or in sequence with the denuclearization process. The future is an extension of the present. As such, unification discourse out of sync with reality and does not reflect the present is likely to be dismissed by the public.

One of the challenges in broadening a consensus on unification at the national level is the poor infrastructure needed for related policies. Unification education, which forms the backbone of this policy, is undertaken as a dual process with the Ministry of Unification formulating the basic plan and the Ministry of Education implementing this plan as the agency that oversees the national school curriculum. About 70% of elementary school students, 80% of middle school students, and 90% of high school students receive less than four hours of unification-related classes per year, and these classes are mainly based on videos and lectures. Dongguk University is the only university in South Korea that has

introduced North Korean studies as a major at the undergraduate level. There are only about 10 North Korean studies programs in South Korea, including those at graduate schools and cooperative courses. In this vein, it is fair to say that the education system for nurturing experts in preparation for unification is under threat.

Post-truth phenomenon, North Korea's de facto nuclearization, and poor policy infrastructure do not constitute the entirety of challenges in expanding a consensus on unification. However, there can be little disagreement that these three challenges are key obstacles when it comes to the spread of a unification consensus and the integration of the public.

Tasks for Broadening a Public Consensus on Unification

To respond to these challenges, policy goals must focus on strengthening communication. The post-truth phenomenon, changing inter-Korean relations, and lack of policy infrastructure all serve as mechanisms that deepen generational and political disconnection, disconnection from reality, and disconnection among the government, experts and the public. These mechanisms must therefore be transformed to become mechanisms of connection, which can be achieved through communication.

The pacifist Johan Galtung argued that peace education starts from its form, and not its content. That is, how to teach and expand should be considered to be more important than what to teach and expand. What Galtung meant by form is communication achieved through feedback, discussion and critical thinking. In other words, peace orientation and unification orientation can be achieved through discussion and communication, rather than through the content itself.

Communication can be defined as the act of listening to information, perspectives, and opinions regardless of whether one supports them or not, and assessing one's own thoughts as well as the thoughts of others without prejudice. In other words, communication does not simply mean the exchange of information. Communication in itself is a learning process through which one can become acquainted with liberal democratic values such as the freedom of expression and respect for diversity; recognize the limitations of black-and-white thinking in which all things are regarded as either right or wrong; and

contemplate various possibilities at present and in the future. In addition, given that effective communication requires the ability to freely access and utilize diverse information, enhanced communication will lead to the richness of its content. The upshot is that expanding a public consensus through communication can strengthen not only support towards the need for unification, but also the necessary capabilities to prepare for, and realize unification, and conclude the process after political unification.

Communication was central to unification education in West Germany, which ultimately led to German unification. Just as in the Korean Constitution and the Unification Education Support Act, Article 14 of the Recommendations for the Treatment of the German Problems in the Classroom, enacted by West Germany, emphasizes the legitimacy of unification, stating "German unification is our unwavering goal." West Germany strove towards achieving the legitimacy of unification through the principles of the Beutelsbacher consensus, which are also known as the principles of free discussion and debate. The philosophy of unification education in West Germany, in which the free exchange of various perspectives, including criticism, questions and arguments, will eventually lead to confidence in unification, essentially aligns with Galtung's argument that the form determines the content.

Furthermore, the difference between unification education in West Germany and East Germany was the presence or lack of communication. Both education systems were similar in terms of emphasizing the importance of understanding the other system and transferring knowledge. However, while West Germany placed emphasis on communication such as discussions and presentations, East Germany limited itself to a cramming approach to education. Many West Germans doubted whether unification could actually be realized. Germany's achievements during the unification process, which progressed rapidly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the ensuing integration process cannot be attributed to its "thinking" about whether unification is necessary and whether unification can possibly be achieved. Rather, its capabilities of preparing for unification, accumulated over a lengthy period of time through communication mechanisms, had contributed to these achievements.

Institutionalization of Communication

With a view to building a wider consensus on unification, communication must meet at least four requirements. First of all, it should be a long-term process. One-off communication cannot achieve mutual understanding and connection. It is important to continue providing opportunities for the public to discuss and communicate on issues regarding the Korean Peninsula. The means and assessment of communication requires a long-term perspective. Secondly, communication should be continuous. In particular, the continuity of unification education in school as well as in society must be secured. It is important to ensure that the content and capabilities attained during unification education in school serve as the basis for unification education in society. Thirdly, communication should be flexible in its content. The multi-dimensional aspects of unification should be addressed by covering not only the future of the Korean Peninsula and issues related to unification, but also current issues on the Korean Peninsula.

Specifically, public understanding and communication are necessary when it comes to the implications of North Korea's advancing nuclear capabilities on changing inter-Korean relations, the international order in Northeast Asia, and unification. Supplementing the Unification Plan for One National Community, selected by the Yoon Suk-yeol administration as one of its key policy tasks, also requires a public consensus in consideration of the North Korean nuclear issue. Lastly, communication should be open. Issues related to North Korea and unification are a major source of polarization between conservatives and liberals, resulting in sharp confrontations and conflicts. While it is important to maintain political neutrality across divergent issues, concerns about political neutrality have alienated many from discussions on unification. Therefore, the scope of disputes over topics on unification and North Korea should be clearly defined, and free discussion must be guaranteed within a defined boundary.

The infrastructure for communication should be institutionalized first and foremost considering the conditions necessary for communication to broaden a consensus on unification. Specifically, institutionalizing the framework for ongoing social dialogue should be actively explored. Social dialogue on unification and Korean Peninsula issues over the past four years has achieved desired results. In particular, such dialogue largely consists of

presentations by experts and small group discussions by the public. The necessary environment for communication has been established as professional facilitators mediate discussions and debates in small groups, enabling orderly discussion rather than emotional confrontations between liberals and conservatives. Such social dialogue can be a starting point for communication on issues of unification and the Korean Peninsula as it includes controversial topics, specialized information, discussion and introspection as well as explicit rules for discussion.

Establishing an organization and system dedicated to social dialogue is an urgent task. In addition, unification education in schools needs to encompass communication and social dialogue-based education. Elementary, middle and high school students, who will become young adults in a decade, currently receive less than four hours of unification education per year. Furthermore, these classes consist of only lectures and videos that primarily consist of nothing more than information delivery. The persistence of such an approach towards unification education will result in the younger generation in their 20s having less interest in unification than the current MZ generation. Local governments should also explore ways to expand opportunities for public participation, such as establishing ordinances to promote social dialogue.

Secondly, policy infrastructure should be strengthened. Unification education and consensus policies need to encompass more elements of communication while policies to broaden a consensus on unification should be further fleshed out by setting mid- to long-term goals, developing effective policy measures as well as introducing comprehensive evaluations through implementation and monitoring. Successive governments have pursued unification education and consensus-building not from the perspective of systematic policies, but as government projects. Given the laborious process of preparing for and realizing unification, it is time to pursue mid- to long-term and systematic policies.

To this end, it is important to establish departments dedicated to building a unification consensus. For example, a unification education committee can be established under the National Education Committee, which will be launched in July 2022, to discuss matters pertaining to unification education in schools. Alternatively, the policy-making function of the National Institute for Unification Education can be reinforced. Of course, these

departments should first be launched under the Ministry of Unification, but should not be limited to the Ministry. Given that unification is a cross-cutting issue that encompasses all political, social, and economic systems of the Republic of Korea, preparation and readiness for unification extends beyond the Ministry of Unification.

Finally, research infrastructure for unification studies should be expanded. The importance of acquiring accurate information increases as the post-truth phenomenon continues to permeate society. As information related to North Korea cannot by its nature be directly verified, it is bound to be vulnerable to fake news. It is for this reason that experts who are able to confirm the authenticity of information about North Korea have become more important. Such experts also play an essential role in the process of preparing and readying for unification. While there exist voluminous strands of the legal, institutional, psychological and cultural literature on preparation for unification, these studies require continuous supplementation and revision in consideration of the changing dynamics of the unification environment. Indeed, the quality of preparations for unification inevitably differs depending on whether or not North Korea possesses nuclear weapons.

Considering the current research infrastructure related to North Korea and unification, a training system to nurture professionals should be established at universities and graduate schools. It is regrettable that the number of unification-related departments and graduate schools is shrinking, reflecting the decreasing interest in issues pertaining to the Korean Peninsula. This trend will eventually lead to a lack of professional human resources when it comes to preparing for and realizing unification. National support that includes the establishment of departments and graduate school programs on North Korea and unification is therefore necessary.

Arnold Toynbee argued that civilizations fail when they respond to new challenges using old methods. In the face of new challenges for building a wider consensus on unification, our society should review whether we are stubbornly retaining outdated methods of only delivering information and instilling a sense of necessity and obligation for unification. Until now, policies for expanding a unification consensus have focused on content. Successive governments assumed that the public had a lack of knowledge about unification, and thus information provision would change their perceptions in a positive manner. It is

therefore inevitable that lectures and videos have become the central means of unification education in schools. In other words, the content has determined the form. What are the results of such content-oriented policy for achieving a unification consensus? Can the status quo of content-oriented policy effectively respond to the aforementioned challenges? Now is the time to shift the policy paradigm toward consensus-building through communication. The form must determine the content.

As the old saying goes, “You can do anything you set your mind to.” However, this mindset is nothing but an illusion when it comes to unification issues. What is necessary in the process of practically preparing for and realizing unification is not the will for unification, but the capabilities at the national level to accept and overcome various challenges in the process. These capabilities can be achieved through communication. © KINU 2022