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THE PENINSULA

[2024 in Review] Redefining Inter-Korean Relations

Published December 30, 2024

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Category: Inter-Korean



Both North Korea and South Korea sought to redefine their relationship in 2024. In the past, both countries have publicly affirmed that the unification of the two Koreas is a national priority, but the two governments have engaged in low-level hostilities and high-level denunciations, while little concrete effort has been made to bring the two together over the last seven decades. This past year has seen a significant change.

North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un began 2024 with a New Year's speech announcing that the North would no longer seek reconciliation and reunification with the South. "It is time for us to acknowledge the reality and clarify our relationship with the South," Kim said, demanding all references to unification be removed from the North Korean constitution. Two weeks later, in a lengthy speech to the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), he again expressed more aggressive sentiments toward the South than in the past.

In October 2024, North Korean state media reported that the SPA amended the North Korean constitution but did not specify whether those changes included removal of unification as a national objective. Soon thereafter, both North Korea's domestic and externally facing state media reported on the country's mid-October destruction and blockage of roads and railways connecting the two Koreas, stating such measures were consistent with the constitution's clear definition of the ROK as a "hostile state." However,

official **state media** has left unclear the exact extent to which Kim's demands were incorporated into new constitutional language. If the language on national unification has indeed been removed, it would signal a fundamental shift in national identity, insofar as unification had been enshrined in the North Korean constitution since the early days of Kim Il-sung's rule.

In Seoul, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol offered an alternative vision in a speech on August 15, the 79th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945. In stark contrast to Kim's apparent abandonment of the policy of national unification, President Yoon **affirmed** that South Korea would continue to seek a peacefully unified Korean state.

Yoon's announced **Unification Doctrine** reaffirmed South Korea's view of unification and rejected Kim's vision of separate countries. His view did not focus on inter-Korean negotiation but on "changing the minds of the North Korean people to make them ardently desire a freedom-based unification." Not only does Yoon clearly view unification as a process led by South Korea—emphasizing South Korea's superior economic prosperity—but the values-based Unification Doctrine itself implicitly negates the Kim regime as currently constituted.

By the end of 2024, however, the prospect of moving toward Korean unification showed no progress. President Yoon's impeachment on December 14 suspended his presidential duties, and South Korea's Constitutional Court **must affirm** the National Assembly's vote to remove Yoon from office, which could take up to six months. In the meantime, the interim government will not be able to pursue bold foreign policy initiatives, particularly as the National Assembly remains under opposition control. Any next steps in inter-Korean relations will not occur until after a new presidential election, if the Constitutional Court upholds Yoon's removal from office. Furthermore, if a progressive president were to enter office following Yoon's removal, he or she would be unlikely to embrace Yoon's unification vision.

Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un remains in power in North Korea and is clearly taking the North away from unification, with North Korean state media reporting that the next SPA session to be convened early next year could involve yet further revisions to the constitution. There are indications, however, that Kim may be pursuing such an approach in an effort to deal with **internal instability** in the North. While South Korean governments across a broad political spectrum have sought closer relations with North Korea, the Kim regime has opposed any such strengthening of ties, even when they have been to the advantage of the North Korean people.

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