



PROCEEDINGS

TOWARD A FREE AND UNIFIED KOREA— RESOLVING THE KOREA CHALLENGE AT ITS SOURCE

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Toward a Free and Unified Korea—Resolving the Korea Challenge at Its Source” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on May 19, 2026. The symposium highlighted the findings and conclusions of a recent study published as a National Institute Information Series assessing the importance of Korean unification and making recommendations to advance the prospects for a free, democratic, prosperous, and unified Korean peninsula.

David J. Trachtenberg (moderator)

David J. Trachtenberg is Senior Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy and previously served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

Although recent events have shifted public attention to other issues and threats, North Korea remains a serious security problem. Despite President Trump’s personal diplomacy efforts during his first term to engage Kim Jong Un, North Korea continues to develop its nuclear and missile program. In addition, Pyongyang reportedly has sent weapons to Russia and North Korean troops are fighting alongside Russian forces against Ukraine. North Korea also continues to rely heavily on economic and other assistance from China, where President Trump just concluded a summit with Xi Jinping.

Despite decades of effort by the United States to change the security calculus of the Kim dynasty with both sticks and carrots, the North Korean regime remains hostile to the United States and the West, deprives its citizenry of basic human rights, remains ideologically rigid in its internal and external affairs, and continues to pursue policies that threaten peace and stability not just on the peninsula but on a wider level. In retrospect, it seems that a reboot of U.S. policy toward North Korea is warranted.

The study co-authored by our panelists that we recently published argues for just such a reboot.¹ And while I will leave it to them to discuss its conclusions and recommendations, I would like to briefly highlight some of its relevant points.

First, it acknowledges that U.S. policy, which has typically focused on the denuclearization of North Korea first and foremost, has failed to achieve the desired results. While acknowledging that the North Korean nuclear threat “continues to expand,” the question of whether the denuclearization issue should have been prioritized to the exclusion of other human rights and civil society issues is one the study addresses. Indeed, in discussing North Korea at the recent Beijing summit, the White House noted that “President

¹ Robert Joseph, Nicholas Eberstadt, James Flynn, Hyun-seung Lee, Michael Marshall, David Maxwell, and Greg Scarlatoiu, “Toward a Free and Unified Korea—Resolving the Korea Challenge at Its Source,” *Information Series No. 658* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, April 27, 2026), https://nipp.org/information_series/robert-joseph-nicholas-eberstadt-james-flynn-hyun-seung-lee-michael-marshall-david-maxwell-and-greg-scarlatoiutoward-a-free-and-unified-korea-resolving-the-korea-challenge-at-its-source/.



Trump and President Xi confirmed their shared goal to denuclearize North Korea.”² This is the only reference to discussions of North Korea in the post-summit White House Fact Sheet.

Second, the study argues that there is a viable path toward Korean unification that can lead to a free, democratic, and unified Korean peninsula. The objective of unification, it notes, “must incorporate both geopolitical and cultural dimensions” and should be seen as the embodiment of a “shared heritage” between the North and the South.

Third, it challenges some of the conventional wisdom that suggests this goal is unobtainable, addressing some of the “persistent myths” that have, in the study’s words, “discouraged serious strategic planning for Korean unification.” These include concerns that unification will be opposed by China, be inordinately expensive, result in a weakening of the strategic partnership with the United States, and lead to war.

Finally, it offers multiple recommendations for U.S. and allied policymakers to help accelerate an end to what the study calls the “structural anomaly” of a divided Korea.

The notion of a unified Korea that is free, prosperous, and no longer a nuclear threat may not be as far-fetched as some would believe. And the topic is actually quite timely. Within days of the study’s publication, it was reported that North Korea has officially revised its constitution, for the first time deleting all references to unification and explicitly declaring its territorial boundaries.³ Perhaps Pyongyang actually fears that a reunified Korean peninsula may be the death knell for the system of governance that currently rules in the North and the end of the Kim dynasty. Interestingly, this was followed yesterday by release of a new South Korean White Paper that, while still expressing support for ultimate unification as a longer-term goal, also changes its earlier tone and argues for a “two-state relationship.”⁴

With this backdrop, how best to bring about a free and unified Korea is the subject of today’s discussion.

² The White House, “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Secures Historic Deals with China, Delivering for American Workers, Farmers, and Industry,” May 17, 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2026/05/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-secures-historic-deals-with-china-delivering-for-american-workers-farmers-and-industry/>; Anton Sokolin, “US, China to work on denuclearizing North Korea: White House,” *NK News*, May 18, 2026, <https://www.nknews.org/2026/05/us-china-to-work-on-denuclearizing-north-korea-white-house/>.

³ Kyu-seok Shim, “North Korea revises constitution to drop references to unification of Korean Peninsula,” *Reuters*, May 6, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/north-korea-revises-constitution-drop-references-unification-korean-peninsula-2026-05-06/>.

⁴ Woo Jae-yeon, “Unification white paper pivots to peaceful ‘two-state’ coexistence with N. Korea,” *Yonhap News Agency*, May 18, 2026, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2026/05/18/Unification-Ministry-white-paper-peaceful-coexistence-North-Korea/3381779093017/

Robert G. Joseph

Robert G. Joseph is former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, Senior Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy and a member of the Board of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea.

Good afternoon, everyone. David, thank you for the invitation to join you and for the opportunity to highlight our report. As you mentioned, the report is the product of a working group that I had the privilege of chairing. In addition to the three other members who are speaking here today, the group included James Flynn, President of the Global Peace Foundation; Dr. Nick Eberstadt from the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and an internationally recognized expert on political economy; and David Maxwell, Vice President of the Center for Asia Pacific Strategy and a former special forces officer with over 30 years of experience in Asia.

All working group members shared the view that, for over three decades, U.S. and international policies have failed to meet the threat from North Korea. The almost exclusive focus on denuclearization provided time and concessions to the Kim regime that would not only fail to end the North's nuclear program but would contribute to today's situation. Pyongyang is making as many nuclear weapons as fast as it can – from both enriched uranium and plutonium. The size of its rapidly growing arsenal is often estimated at 60 to 80 weapons, but given the many uncertainties, it could be much larger.

A Rand report from several years ago suggested the North could have over 200 weapons by 2027, supported by a similarly aggressive missile build up that today threatens the entire American continent. And the threat, despite little attention being paid to it, is only getting worse. Whether it's 2027 or 2030, just imagine what North Korea might do with 200 nuclear weapons.

Looking at this monumental failure of policy, all members of the working group thought it essential to take a fundamentally different approach to countering the full spectrum of threats from North Korea. That approach is outlined in our report. We conclude that the underlying national security challenges on the peninsula—as well as the human rights nightmare that defines life in the North—can only be resolved by ending the artificial division of the peninsula and the establishment of a free and unified Korea.

Looking at the prospects for unification from a geostrategic, cultural and economic perspective, we conclude that a unified and democratic Korea is achievable. We debunk the myths that have long impeded any substantial effort to work toward unification. In fact, we find that unification is the only durable solution to the security threats and human rights catastrophe that plays out every day in the North.

You can read the findings and conclusions in the report. Hyun-seung, Greg, and Michael will provide further context for the report and address a number of the key issues. I will follow their comments with a brief list of our policy recommendations. So let me stop here and turn it over to Hyun-seung.

Hyun-Seung Lee

Hyun-Seung Lee is a North Korean escapee, the lead strategist at the Global Peace Foundation, the founder of North Korean Young Leaders Assembly and a guest contributor to UPI. He has prior experience in North Korea's shipping and mining sectors and as a sergeant in the DPRK Army Special Force. He fled in 2014 due to severe governmental purges. He holds a bachelor's degree in economics from Dongbei University of Finance and Economics and a master's degree in public administration from Columbia University.

Introduction

North Korea no longer publicly champions Korean reunification as an aspirational, forward-looking policy objective. What was once a foundational national ideal—sustained for over seven decades—has been supplanted by a framework that redefines the two Koreas as mutually hostile, sovereign states.

Yet this shift is better understood not as an abandonment of reunification as a goal, but as a strategic reinvention of how that goal is to be achieved under Kim Jong Un. North Korea has moved away from a concept of reunification grounded in inter-Korean dialogue and ethnic solidarity, toward one defined by nuclear deterrence, asymmetric pressure, and leveraged dominance over the South. Reunification has not disappeared from North Korea's long-term agenda—it has been recast as an outcome achievable only on Pyongyang's terms.

The Roots of the Policy Shift

For decades, North Korea's reunification logic was anchored in three core principles: independence, peaceful means, and great national unity—the so-called “Three Principles of Fatherland Reunification.” Seoul was consistently portrayed as occupied territory, with the narrative that South Koreans, once freed from American domination, would naturally embrace the North's revolutionary system.

Under Kim Jong Un, however, this framework has been displaced by a calculus centered on regime survival and strategic security. The pivotal turning point was North Korea's self-declaration as a nuclear-armed state, having effectively completed a strategic arsenal capable of threatening the continental United States with long-range missiles and nuclear warheads. With that capability in hand, Pyongyang calculated that it stood to gain more by holding firm in a position of relative parity with Washington than by pursuing the difficult compromises and negotiations that genuine reunification efforts would require.

The Retreat of the “Our Nation” Strategy

During the period before North Korea had consolidated its nuclear deterrent, Pyongyang still invested in the hope that the “Our Nation First” strategy could pry South Korea away from the United States. The logic was that by eroding domestic South Korean support for the U.S.

military presence through anti-American propaganda and political influence, North Korea could ultimately shape the peninsula according to its will. Over decades, Pyongyang expanded inter-Korean outreach under the banners of ethnic reconciliation, tourism, economic cooperation, and people-to-people exchange—yet the original objective of driving out U.S. forces and shifting South Korean public opinion was never achieved.

North Korea is now deliberately dismantling the very framework of shared ethnic nationhood. By declaring the two Koreas “two hostile states,” Pyongyang has repositioned South Korea—no longer as a partner to be persuaded and courted, but as an adversary to be subdued, if necessary, through military force and nuclear coercion. This is not merely a rhetorical shift. It can be read as a formal reopening of the possibility of coercive reunification, achieved not through persuasion but through military and nuclear dominance.

In short, North Korea is not simply speaking of reunification as a matter of choice—it is rewriting the conditions under which reunification occurs, with its military and nuclear capabilities as the decisive instrument.

Strategic Refinement and the Changing Role of Nuclear Weapons

On the surface, the Kim Jong Un regime appears to have chosen permanent division—or “hostile coexistence”—over reunification. The demolition of inter-Korean rail links and liaison offices, the formal designation of Seoul as a hostile state, the closure of cross-border channels, and the institutionalization of a dual-state structure all seem to support this reading.

But this is more accurately understood as a refinement of strategy, not a surrender of purpose. Kim Jong Un once stated, in effect, that North Korea would not use nuclear weapons against fellow Koreans—framing Pyongyang’s arsenal as fundamentally a deterrent against the United States, not a weapon to be turned on the South.

The “two hostile states” declaration, however, quietly unravels that premise. If South Korea is no longer “our people” but an enemy state, North Korea’s nuclear posture can be reframed accordingly—not merely as deterrence against America, but as a viable military option against the South, including the possibility of preemptive use. From Pyongyang’s vantage point, the implications are clear: South Korea is no longer “us,” North Korea has freed itself from the ethical and political constraints that once prohibited nuclear use against fellow Koreans, and statements suggesting the military “pacification” or conquest of the South are recurring with greater frequency.

This trajectory does not signal the abandonment of reunification. It signals a change in method and timing—from negotiated integration to coercive, military-backed imposition.

Outlook and Strategic Implications

In the near term, there is little indication that North Korea intends to return to a diplomacy-centered approach to reunification. The Kim Jong Un regime’s policy trajectory remains fixed

on a combination of nuclear deterrence, strategic alignment with Russia and China, intensified internal control, and the permanent securitization of its posture toward Seoul.

That said, several shifting variables could prompt North Korea to revisit reunification diplomacy:

- A fundamental transformation in U.S.–North Korea relations;
- A significant degradation of North Korea’s nuclear deterrent capacity through intensified sanctions or internal instability;
- A strategic reorientation by China or Russia on Korean Peninsula policy; and
- A severe economic crisis or a succession crisis within North Korea.

Absent such shifts, the most accurate characterization of North Korea’s current posture is this: Pyongyang has not abandoned its ultimate objective of absorbing and dominating South Korea. It has, however, replaced the instruments of that objective—moving from negotiation, alliance-building, and social integration, to nuclear coercion and military pressure—while pursuing a structure in which the timing and conditions of reunification remain entirely under North Korea’s control.

Policy Recommendations for the United States: From Management to Resolution

Over the past three decades, the United States has experienced repeated failures in negotiations over North Korea’s nuclear program and human rights record. The root cause of these failures, however, is not flawed American policy or deficient negotiating technique—it is the Kim regime’s overriding imperative of self-preservation. Pyongyang’s strategy and posture have systematically prevented any negotiation from producing meaningful progress. Equally important is the fact that Washington was persistently slow to accurately assess the fundamental nature of the Kim dictatorship.

In light of this history, the arms control and disarmament negotiations currently gaining renewed attention are unlikely to offer Kim Jong Un sufficient incentive to engage genuinely—and there is no guarantee that North Korea would participate in such a process with the transparency and good faith that it requires. The probability is high that any such effort ends in yet another failure.

The United States must therefore shift its foundational objective: from managing the North Korean threat to resolving it. That resolution is a free and unified Korean Peninsula. Reunification represents the most durable and comprehensive answer to the intertwined challenges of North Korea’s nuclear program, its systematic human rights abuses, and the freedom of its people.

With that resolution and objective defined, what remains is execution—and that is the task of American policymakers, strategists, and practitioners. Specifically, U.S. policy must:

- Develop a clear-eyed understanding of the nature of the Kim regime—its nuclear ambitions, its human rights record, and its fundamental character as a system;

- Pursue a strategy centered not on negotiation and concession, but on regime transformation and the liberation of the North Korean people;
- Deter and counter North Korea's pursuit of coercive reunification on its own terms; and
- Strengthen the solidarity between the people of South Korea and the people of North Korea in their shared aspiration for freedom.

North Korea's current reunification policy is, at its core, a redefinition of reunification as a coercive scenario—achievable only on Pyongyang's conditions, and increasingly backed by military and nuclear force. The United States must confront this new reality directly, and build a concrete strategy capable of both preventing North Korean coercive reunification and advancing the cause of a free and unified Korea.

The era of managing the threat through negotiation must give way to the era of resolving the threat through unification. That is the path that best serves the long-term interests of peace and freedom on the Korean Peninsula—and of American security.

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Greg Scarlatoiu

Greg Scarlatoiu is President and CEO of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, President of the International Council on Korean Studies, and a Visiting Professor at Yonsei University.

North Korean Human Rights: Old and New Challenges

Since its inception three decades ago, the North Korean human rights movement has been facing some familiar challenges. Human rights in North Korea are often outcompeted by political, security, and military issues. Human rights in North Korea and the slow-motion North Korean holocaust are often outpaced by other humanitarian and human rights crises, in Ukraine, the Middle East, the Mediterranean Basin, or South Asia. At the State Department and foreign ministries around the world, there is bias against human rights, a tendency to relegate human rights to second or third-tier status. This bias begins in college, as diplomatic apprentices initiate their training in international relations. North Korean human rights defenders also suffer from a perennial lack of funding and resources.

Now we face a systemic challenge. The U.S.-dominated post-Cold War order included elements of realism, liberalism, institutionalism, and constructivism. Realism focuses on the projection of power. Liberalism concentrates on change from within, through work on human rights, humanitarian affairs, and information dissemination. Institutionalism centers on multilateral cooperation and dialogue, through the UN and other international organizations. Constructivism argues that global politics is shaped by socially constructed ideas, norms, and identities, not just material power.

In addressing North Korean human rights, governments, international organizations and NGOs have applied elements relating to all of these four theories of international relations: Realist, through extended deterrence and containment based on the U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance; liberal, through civil society and like-minded governments addressing human rights and humanitarian issues; institutionalist, through UN and other international organization (IO) involvement; and constructivist, through cooperation among like-minded democracies, based on shared beliefs and values.

We are now witnessing a hard turn toward realism, even offensive realism. This is happening at the expense of liberal, institutionalist, and constructivist elements of the international order, which are rapidly evaporating. At this stage it is more than just lack of interest or having to compete against other issues that impedes the North Korean human rights movement. Civil society and human rights defenders are facing an increasingly steep systemic bias against human rights.

Human Rights and Peaceful Positive Change in North Korea

Despite ever mounting difficulties, enacting positive change in North Korea is still possible. To do that, the following components of a peaceful intervention are needed:

1. Since U.S., ROK or any other government or IO support is unavailable, secure funding from private sources.
2. In preparation for a global campaign, select and synthesize material reflecting North Korea's major human rights violations, from its vast system of unlawful imprisonment to the *songbun* system of social discrimination, and to the human rights-security nexus.
3. Highlight the success stories of young North Koreans living outside the country, some of them media influencers in their adopted new home, in order to highlight a new sense of North Korean escapee identity—youthful, vibrant, successful, forward-looking.
4. Launch a global campaign to highlight North Korea's crimes against humanity and other human rights violations as well as the human rights-security nexus.
5. Conduct information operations inside North Korea with the potential to empower the people through information, with the particular goal of creating a "revolutionary generation" among the younger population of that country.
6. Engage free North Koreans living outside the country in preparation for unification, through training and capacity building focused on tackling priority areas at the early stages of the future post-transformation period.

While unification of the homeland is of the utmost importance, unification must focus on people rather than territory. For good reasons, South Korean scholars have focused on the German precedent. The ensuing result has been excessive focus on the cost, rather than the benefits of unification.

A New North Korean Identity

Since the “Arduous March” of the 1990s, North Korean identity has been defined by stories of suffering, death, and survival. In recent years, young former North Korean social media influencers have been shaping a new identity, memorializing the past while expressing hope and determination for the future. For perfectly good reasons, the story of North Korean escapees has been one of tragedy, loss, and victimization. That narrative has increased awareness of North Korean human rights violations. It has also exacerbated views that differences between the two Koreas are insurmountable.

An information campaign targeting the people of North Korea must remain focused on the tragic narrative of North Korean human rights. It must also highlight a new optimistic sense of identity developing among young free North Koreans living outside the country. It is essential to work with the most effective North Korean social media influencers to examine the newly emerging North Korean identity and the ways it could be presented to inform both global audiences and the people of North Korea.

The “Arduous March” is deeply etched as a period of profound suffering among North Koreans, and the new identity for young North Koreans is being forged within this historical backdrop. Young North Korean influencers focus on resilience and remembrance. They have not forgotten this tragic chapter of their history. Instead, they have used it as a foundation for building narratives of strength and survival. They embrace their resilience and are steering their identity toward a future of hope and self-determination. There has been a visible shift in narrative from one of scarcity and endurance to empowerment and advocacy. They have found empowerment through expression. They aim to educate and engage a global audience through their social media presence.

The identity of young North Korean escapees today is centered on cultural synthesis and global integration. Having endured the Arduous March and resettled in their new homes in South Korea, the United States, and other countries, they embody an identity that respects its origins yet is globally integrated. This identity is informed by the lessons of resilience and the opportunities of a connected world. Personal insights enable young former North Korean influencers to develop a forward-looking identity. These young North Koreans are no longer solely witnesses to the past, but are also active participants in shaping a new, empowered identity that looks to the future with resolve and optimism.

The next generation of thought leaders and trend-setters in the North Korean escapee community brings deep personal perspectives on evolving identities. The most prominent ones seek to connect with diverse audiences and impact them by sharing stories of resilience and triumph. No longer confined to the geographical and political boundaries of North Korea, these young influencers establish their identity beyond borders, an identity that honors their origins while celebrating the freedoms and personal growth they have discovered in their new homes. They challenge perceptions, transcending the important but narrow lens of escape from oppression. They can shape perceptions of North Korea in the global consciousness and redefine what it means to be a North Korean in the 21st century.

The exploration of this digital identity transformation has potential implications for cultural understanding, diplomacy, and the personal growth of individuals who have left North Korea. The global discourse on North Korean escapees must shift to include multifaceted representations that celebrate their complexities. By examining the intersection of personal history, cultural adaptation, and digital expression, one can present a compelling case to North and South Korean audiences, while compelling global audiences to listen, learn, and contribute to that discourse.

The 1990 German reunification is surely a precedent of the utmost value. Other precedents, including the German unification of 1871, grounded in Otto von Bismarck's pragmatic *realpolitik*, must be examined. Most importantly, one must remember the enlightened European revolutionary generations that accomplished the Italian unification, the *Risorgimento* (1861-1871) and the Western-educated generation of young 1848 Romanian revolutionaries who accomplished the unification of two of the Romanian principalities (Wallachia and Moldova), creating the Kingdom of Romania in the process.

What North Korea needs is an enlightened "revolutionary" generation, aware of the outside world, the corruption of the Kim family regime, and the abysmal human rights situation. Awareness will be only the first step. The capacity to organize despite draconian coercion, control, surveillance, and punishment will be of the essence. And so will be the courage to enact change. Contraband K-culture provides entertainment and a window on North Korea. But K-pop does not create revolutionaries. Information campaigns must be cognizant of that aspect, and concentrate on enhancing awareness, capacity to organize, and the courage to act within the younger generations of North Koreans.

All countries change after unification. The only unification one can envision is under a free, democratic, prosperous, capitalist Republic of Korea. And there is no doubt that the sense of Korean identity will change, as it did in Germany in 1871, in Italy in 1861-1871, and in Romania in 1859 and 1918. To ensure a balanced, stable transition to a new sense of unified national identity, compliance with fundamental human rights principles will be of the essence.

Michael Marshall

Michael Marshall is Editor-in-Chief Emeritus of United Press International and Board Member of the Global Peace Foundation.

How North Korea Views Its Core Interests

Thirty plus years of U.S. efforts to denuclearize North Korea have failed to achieve their goal. Worse, they have resulted in a more nuclear capable North Korea with an increasingly diversified, and survivable, array of delivery systems. Clearly, the time has come for a radical reassessment and reset in policy towards the North Korean nuclear threat.

One of the major reasons the pursuit of denuclearization failed, was the lack of understanding of how North Korea's leadership viewed their own core interests. Central to the Kim family regime's survival strategy is the possession of nuclear weapons, and totalitarian control over their population. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) does, indeed, have a constitution. It is not one that guarantees any rights for its citizens.

Drawing the Right Conclusions

Any effective new policy approach must recognize this reality. It must also recognize that the Kim regime strategy is ultimately unsustainable. The recently published book, *Privileged but Powerless*, by Jieun Baek, documents the grievances of the North Korean elites: those who run the system, get to live in Pyongyang, enjoy a variety of benefits, but know that an inadvertent misstep could lead to their execution or imprisonment – and that of their family members.

A system where ideological commitment has been replaced by fear, and where expressions of loyalty are a survival strategy, cannot endure indefinitely. Change will occur, even though we cannot predict when or exactly how. Consequently, preparing for internal change inside North Korea is a critical national security requirement.

The Starting Point: Solid Joint Security

The policy paper, "Towards a Free and Unified Korea," is forward-looking, with its emphasis on human rights and access to information as steps advancing towards eventual unification. But the pursuit of these policies must rest upon a solid security base.

The paper calls for a robust regime of containment and deterrence. It urges strengthening U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK)-Japan cooperation towards that end and building upon the 2023 Camp David Accords. It envisages continued contingency planning among the three partners for the potential crises that will emerge in the North.

The Role of Civil Society

The nature of Kim Jong Un's strategic worldview makes the prospect of any progress through relying solely on intergovernmental exchanges slim indeed. What he wants the United States and its allies are not ready to give, and what they want, denuclearization, he is not ready to give. Negotiating a compromise is clearly not in Kim's playbook.

A comprehensive strategy for dealing with North Korea calls for a broader approach and fresh thinking. That is why human rights and information access for the North Korean people are key pillars of the policy paper's proposals.

Essential to this approach are initiatives pursued by civil society groups such as the coalition, Action for Korea United. These should operate on their own track, independent of government, but government should recognize their value. They can raise issues and mobilize public opinion in ways governments cannot.

How do such groups work? First, they emphasize the human dimension of Korea's division. They make the issue the lives and fortunes of 26 million Koreans in the North rather than thinking the Kim regime *is* North Korea.

They promote solidarity with the people in the North, among South Koreans, the Korean diaspora, and friends of Korea worldwide. They are working in South Korea to revive a sense of national identity and purpose rooted in Korea's history. *Hongikingan*, "living for the greater benefit of all humanity," is the iconic expression of Korean national purpose, the heart that has run like a thread through centuries of its history. Today it can serve as a guiding ideal for reuniting a divided people.

Lessons from the Korean Independence Movement

The initial step is to establish a foundation of historical, moral, and political principles for unification, among South Koreans. A clear narrative account of Korea's identity and unfinished history from the early 20th century must be established.

Today, the narrative in the South, like the country as a whole, is divided. The left looks to the historic Sam Il Independence movement, launched on March 1, 1919, against Japanese colonial rule, as the true birth of the Korean nation. Korean conservatives react by saying, "No, Korea was born with the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948."

Of course, that date marks the birth of an officially, politically divided Korea, as the DPRK formally established itself the same year. Narrative is important in generating public understanding and support. The 1919 Independence movement should be viewed as the birth moment of the modern Korean nation, at least in principle, even though that aspiration remains to be fulfilled.

It should not be co-opted by one political faction but should represent the hopes for a unified Korean people and nation. The Independence movement was not a socialist movement. It was a movement of remarkable unity, restraint, and spiritual idealism translated into political aspiration. The 33 signatories of the Korean Declaration of Independence represented various Christian denominations, Buddhism, and Chondogyo, a native Korean spiritual tradition.

Their aspirations should empower the contemporary civil society movement for reuniting the Korean people to the point where these ideals and their implementation are taught in Korean schools.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Agency

This paper looks beyond policies limited to situational management. It sets out a long-term goal that aligns with the principles that underlie liberal democracies. Up until now U.S. and ROK policy toward North Korea has been largely reactive. Three generations of Kim's have called the tune. "Towards a Free and Unified Korea" places agency and initiative in the hands of the United States and its democratic allies.
