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Confronting North Korea: Emphasize Security To Advance Human Rights

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North Korea is a multilateral conundrum, challenging the U.S., China, and numerous countries in between. Despite enduring decades of confrontation and isolation, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea continues to accelerate nuclear development, miniaturize nuclear weapons, and produce intercontinental missiles.

Failure to restrain the DPRK, along with understandable horror at its mass violation of human rights, caused some analysts to urge Washington to emphasize improving human rights and overthrowing the Kim dynasty. For instance, Carl Gershman of the National Endowment for Democracy recently argued that "human rights must come first." After all, he contended, "The basic issue, therefore, is not transactional but has to do with the nature of the North Korean regime."

Which means the existing government must go. U.S. legislation approved in February allows application of secondary sanctions against entities dealing with the North, which appears to be causing some Chinese banks and firms to drop business with the DPRK. The *Wall Street Journal* declared: "Now is the time to squeeze even harder with a goal of regime change."

The North Korean nuclear crisis has been raging for more than a quarter century. Unfortunately, dealing with Pyongyang requires choosing the least bad alternative.

So far negotiations have failed. Few observers believe the DPRK is prepared to trade away its nuclear arsenal. Even if it did, the regime's manifold human rights abuses would continue.

Despite agreeing to tougher sanctions, Beijing has refused to end energy and food aid, which helps keep the Kim dynasty afloat. Military strikes against the North's nuclear facilities almost certainly would trigger retaliation and potentially full-scale war.

So the desire to change the regime is understandable and a worthy objective. But the presumption that attempting to do so would solve the North's human rights and nuclear problems is unrealistic. Unfortunately, focusing on human rights and regime change likely would fail to achieve either, while exacerbating the security threats which have unsettled the region.

The North Korean system is uniquely odious. But like other authoritarian regimes it emphasizes the desire for self-preservation. In this sense human rights may be more important than nuclear weapons to Pyongyang. The government might trade away nukes or make other concessions to promote regime security. However, domestic politics, to which human rights *is* integral, is regime security. Yielding totalitarian control risks turning into political surrender.

Thus, to predicate security discussions on human rights concessions is to preclude the former. While no negotiation seems likely to strip the North of its nuclear weapons, Pyongyang might be amenable to making more limited but still worthwhile agreements—adopting limits on proliferation, restricting missile development, withdrawing conventional forces from advanced positions along the DMZ. It's a possibility worth exploring, however unlikely a positive outcome might seem to be.

Moreover, launching a human rights crusade without the means to achieve the end is little more than an act of moral vanity. Steps like increasing the flow of information into the North are neither easy to implement nor likely to threaten the regime.

Unfortunately, the U.S. government has no ability to protect North Koreans from their own government. Bomb Pyongyang? Tighten sanctions? Push Beijing to end support for North Korea? If such steps don't work for nukes, they won't work for human rights.

Indeed, as long as security issues remain unresolved, Pyongyang is unlikely to address human rights. Why would an angry, impoverished, isolated, fearful, and well-armed North Korea agree to reshape its political system to satisfy its antagonistic Western adversaries? DPRK officials would likely see more intense human rights demands as further evidence of attempted regime change.

Forthrightly pursuing regime change would make any negotiations less likely. As oft has been said, even paranoids have enemies. The North has watched the U.S. routinely overthrow its adversaries. North Korean commentary was particularly sharp regarding the West targeting Moammar Khaddafi, who negotiated away his nuclear and missile programs. Openly attempting to overthrow Kim Jong-un would make him dig in and more resolutely resist any liberalization.

Moreover, prioritizing human rights and regime change would push the People's Republic of China back toward the North. The PRC demonstrated more than its usual frustration with Pyongyang after the DPRK's fourth nuclear test earlier this year. Beijing agreed to tougher sanctions against North Korea—and so far has implemented them more rigorously than in the past.

However, the Chinese government oppresses its own people and is concerned about its own stability. It has routinely dealt with other abusive regimes under Western sanction, such as Burma, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. Beijing is not going to punish the North to improve the latter's human rights practices.

Ironically, the PRC instead might seek its own variant of regime change, yielding a more predictable, responsible authoritarian government ready to cooperate with its big neighbor. China does not want a chaotic implosion, which could yield armed conflict, mass refugee flows, loose nuclear weapons, and ultimately a united Korea allied with America.

Indeed, Western governments should be careful what they wish for. The prime question for regime change should be: compared to what? Both Iraq and Libya demonstrated how removing a dictator can create greater hardship for oppressed peoples and security threats for other nations. A messy denouement to the Kim regime would invite military intervention by South Korea, the U.S., and China, creating an explosive situation.

Or Kim might be replaced by a less confrontational dictator more willing to respect the PRC's interests—indeed, one supported if not elevated by Beijing. Such a regime might continue to oppress the North Korean people, maintain threatening weapons programs, and challenge the Republic of Korea, while enjoying China's support. In which case the West would end up entrenching the general system if not the specific regime that it had hoped to defenestrate.

There are no easy answers when it comes to the DPRK. However, the West's priority should remain to diminish the security threats posed by Pyongyang. Doing so won't be easy. In fact, it might be impossible. But progress in this area would improve conditions for eventual political and human rights reform. Frustration with North Korea should not lead the West to allow the perfect to become enemy of the good.

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