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No Government Foreign Aid For North Korea

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North Korea is suffering from another natural disaster, which seems to have been an almost annual event in the country's 68-year history. Floods have devastated parts of the North, displacing some 70,000 residents. The United Nations is seeking nearly \$30 million to aid Pyongyang.

Alas, such tragedy is nothing new for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Last year the DPRK claimed "the worst drought in 100 years." The latter might have been true, but Pyongyang oft has exaggerated its needs to win more foreign aid.

Still, North Koreans have paid a high price for their government's sins: Between 1995 and 1997, several hundred thousand — and conceivably as many as two million — people died from famine. Alas, their government was more responsible than nature for that horror.

Almost every "natural" crisis in North Korea is exacerbated by the ruling regime's totalitarian economic and political policies. Collectivism makes overall prosperity nearly impossible and sharply restricts food output. At least the Kim regime's increasing acceptance of limited markets in both agricultural production and distribution makes a disaster like that of two decades ago less likely.

Equally harmful is the diversion of scarce resources into Pyongyang's oversize military and active missile and nuclear programs. Additional resources go to enrich the Kims and their loyal retainers and courtiers. The DPRK could afford to purchase more food for its people if they were the regime's first priority.

As similar, if not quite so severe, problems recur in the North, South Koreans today are debating aid for the DPRK. For a decade Seoul implemented the "Sunshine Policy," which essentially attempted to purchase Pyongyang's friendship.

Between 1995 and 2005 the South gave North Korea nearly \$1.2 billion in food and fertilizer alone. Aid peaked at \$400 million in 2007. President Lee Myung-bak finally cut off most support after North Korea sank a submarine and bombarded an island in 2010.

The U.S. provided a similar amount of aid between 1995 and 2005 in food, medicine and energy. Like the South, Washington also ended the transfers out of frustration in dealing with the DPRK.

Unsurprisingly, South Koreans are skeptical of new aid proposals. Polls show that a majority of the ROK population opposes flood assistance. People believe Seoul should tighten sanctions against the North rather than ease the economic burden on the Kim Jong Un regime.

Although refusing to help seems harsh, the Kim dynasty's behavior leaves little choice. The Republic of Korea "is worried that the North may use the aid from the South to develop its nuclear and missile programs further," explained Choi young-il of Kyunghee University.

In the past Pyongyang diverted aid to favored factions and sold donated food on the domestic black market as well as in China. Even with better accountability, assistance would strengthen the regime. Relieving the DPRK of responsibility for feeding its people would leave more resources available for military purposes.

Of course, such assistance is unlikely to make or break the Kim regime, especially given substantial Chinese backing for Pyongyang. Both the PRC and North appear prepared to do whatever is necessary to preserve the DPRK.

In that case, why provide another opportunity for North Korea to manipulate gullible but well-intentioned neighbors? And if Beijing seems determined to keep the North afloat, let the Chinese pay the entire bill for the Kim dynasty's survival.

However, government-to-government aid is not the only option. The South Korean NGO Council, made up of 59 private groups, announced plans to step in. The Korea Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation intends to send children's clothes, which, the group argued, could not be diverted to other uses by the North.

Even private assistance can help sustain the regime in Pyongyang, but such aid does not help legitimize Kim's rule. Moreover, some organizations, such as the Eugene Bell Foundation, which operates in both the U.S. and ROK, have managed to benefit ill North Koreans rather than influential apparatchiks.

Refusing official government assistance does not require attempting to isolate the DPRK. The North's system shows no signs of disintegration, despite high-level defections and executions, and may survive for years more. With the regime obviously committed to developing intercontinental missiles and nuclear weapons, the U.S. can ill afford to continue ignoring Pyongyang, aid or no aid.

But governments should refuse to treat the North's self-inflicted wounds, including its many "natural" disasters. Responsibility should be placed squarely on the Kim regime and its Chinese patron. The West should avoid helping to sustain this most malignant system.

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