

The American Conservative

Let Americans Go to North Korea

Doug Bandow

July 19, 2017

When I visited the Democratic People's Republic of Korea last month, everyone there seemed calm. But North Korea's development of both nuclear weapons and long-range missiles has created near panic in Washington. For good reason no one wants the DPRK so armed. However, America the superpower has faced far worse, most notably Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union.

The Kim regime is acting out of weakness, not strength, in seeking a nuclear deterrent against U.S. military action. What has American officials so concerned is that Pyongyang's action threatens to prevent them from freely intervening around the globe. The DPRK is threatening to turn the U.S.-South Korea alliance on its head.

There's no good solution. No one is going to talk Kim Jong-un out of his big weapons. Threatening the North simply reinforces the case for building them. China is unwilling to cut off North Korea because Beijing believes its security would suffer if additional, tougher sanctions turned North Korea into a failed state that is ultimately swallowed by the South.

Another policy that won't help is banning travel to the North. The death of American college student Otto Warmbier increased calls to regulate trips to North Korea, prohibiting tourism and requiring approval for other purposes. The State Department already discourages travel to the North. Moreover, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the administration has "been evaluating whether we should put some type of travel visa restriction to North Korea," but had "not yet reached a decision."

However, Reps. Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.) and Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) are pushing the "North Korea Travel Control Act," which would license travel to the North. Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Edward R. Royce (R-Calif.) proclaimed himself in favor of the ban, arguing that "travel propaganda lures far too many people to North Korea."

Whether imposed by executive fiat or statute, a ban is a bad idea.

There is nothing good to say about a totalitarian system which holds some 25 million people in bondage. The system's hallmarks include personality cults, labor camps, social classification system, and religious persecution. But so far the regime has proved impervious to outside attempts at change.

Further isolating the DPRK won't help. A month ago I returned from the DPRK. I went at the invitation of the Institute for American Studies of the Foreign Ministry. My trip won't change the North, but was useful. And even tourist excursions can play a positive role.

Otto Warmbier didn't do anything to warrant what happened to him. We may never know the real story: There's a lot of speculation that there was more behind his arrest. The North almost certainly didn't want to kill him. To the extent they see political benefit in detainees, the regime recognizes that prisoners need to be alive. Years ago they sent an 85-year-old home fairly quickly after arresting him, presumably because of his frail physical condition.

As for Warmbier, medical tests only tell us what didn't appear to happen—the botulism episode alleged by the North Korean and beating suspected by Americans. Most previous captives were not abused; some were held in hotels. While Warmbier's arrest was not justified, it is important to try to understand what happened.

Contrary to some of the frenzied rhetoric circulating in Washington, American tourists are not being enticed to come to the DPRK so they can be kidnapped and used as hostages. As many as 1,000 Americans visit annually and incidents have been few. Just four of the 15 Americans held since 2009 were tourists. Three more U.S. citizens currently are in prison, but none was a tourist. Two were teaching at a school and the third was a businessman. Nor are Americans alone in being arrested by North Korea: it also holds South Koreans and other foreigners. (Nor is Pyongyang alone in arresting Americans. Iran currently detains at least two citizens on dubious charges; Cuba and Egypt have done so in the recent past.)

Still, as a tourist destination the DPRK should not be sold as a drinking holiday, as did Young Pioneer Tours, which organized Warmbier's trip. Indeed, YPT appears to encourage irresponsibility. Alex Hoban was on the Warmbier tour and wrote about heavy drinking, irresponsible leaders, and activities that constituted “a right of passage for misbehaving twentysomethings looking for thrills, spills and stories to brag about back home.” Such behavior was unwise, to put it mildly.

Visitors should keep their wits about them and remember where they are. The North will enforce its rules. Privately North Korean officials say they focus on intentional, not accidental, violations. The regime is particularly tough on foreigners who evangelize, assist defectors/refugees, and degrade the system's neo-religious iconography. Given the state of the U.S.-North Korea relations, no American should assume he or she will receive the benefit of the doubt.

While the DPRK is unique, it is hardly alone in holding, often brutally, foreigners accountable for violating local laws and practices. A non-Muslim better not show up in Mecca or Medina. Don't visit Pakistan and insult the Prophet: a mob will probably dispose of you before you are even arrested, let alone tried. Trashing a Koran might yield the same result. At least until recently peeing on an Atatürk statue in Turkey could get you arrested (though certainly not killed). Desecrating an Orthodox Church in Russia would not be wise. Smuggling drugs has gotten Western tourists executed in countries such as Indonesia.

Try being a Christian missionary in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, or Maldives. In this regard North Korea is not so different. The U.S. prisoner treated worst by Pyongyang was Robert Park, who walked into the North from China with his Bible. There may be no scarier threat than a religious evangelist for a regime that essentially enshrines a secular faith.

Then there are war zones. Americans can and do travel to Afghanistan, Syria, Burma, Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq, and other nations where conflicts rage and guerrillas operate—and visitors can be captured and killed. A freelance journalist might seem more serious than a tourist, but still, it is hard to argue that even then there is any “necessity,” whatever that might mean, for the trek.

Is there some other reason to ban travel? Arrests put the U.S. government in a tough spot, with pressure to negotiate for the prisoner’s release. Washington has little bargaining power should they be arrested: The North rarely has had much more than a visit from some famous or semi-famous person, such as former President Bill Clinton or former UN Ambassador Bill Richardson. Warmbier’s family was angry that the Obama administration had not won Otto’s release, but it is not clear what more could have been done. He ultimately came home not because the Trump administration demanded his return, but because Pyongyang wanted to shift responsibility for someone in poor and apparently declining medical health.

Anyway, licensing travel wouldn’t end the “kidnapping” of Americans, if that’s really what the DPRK was doing. The vast majority of detained Americans, 11 of 15 since 2009, came for other purposes which might be allowed even under a more restrictive system—humanitarian, journalistic, educational, business. If Pyongyang simply wants victims, banning tourists might encourage the North Koreans to look for additional reasons to jail other visitors.

Tourism offers the Kim regime some financial benefit, but not much. Travelers bring in relatively small amounts of cash compared to the amount necessary to build nuclear weapons. At most, individual tourists are thought spend a couple thousand dollars or so in the North. Reducing the number of American travelers might not even change the total number of visitors that much, to the extent that their absence opened space for others.

Equally important, the U.S. would have no way to police the prohibition. For years Americans traveled to Cuba illegally through either Canada or Jamaica and Cuba did not stamp their passports. Going to the North illegally through China would be equally easy: Speaking from experience, the North Koreans provide stand-alone visas to Americans that are taken upon exit, and do not stamp Americans’ passports. Except for the photos I took there would have been no evidence for U.S. officials that I was in the DPRK. Ironically, the ban would make the destination seem even more exotic and thus attractive to some. With more than 30 tour companies operating in North Korea, some probably would specialize in illicit U.S. travel.

Nor does tourism raise the North’s international stature. To the contrary, seeing the country removes any illusions that visitors could have about such a system. One critic called a DPRK holiday “torture porn” and couldn’t imagine what there was to “enjoy” about such a trip. Gaining experience and knowledge is worthwhile, and often enjoyable, even when the subject is disquieting, or even alarming.

On my first trip 25 years ago my hosts recognized my skepticism of their political theology and told me there was no leader like theirs in the world. I admitted that “Great Leader George H.W. Bush” didn’t sound quite right. But neither was I prepared to start chanting praises to Kim Il-sung. The iconography remains stifling and dozens of times I heard the same phrase: “under the wise leadership of the Supreme Leader.” I have no idea how many people I talked with believed what they were saying, which actually made the experience even creepier. I must admit, the not-so-wise leadership of not-so-supreme leader Donald Trump looks good in comparison.

With the Kim dynasty so far intransigent and resilient, the best hope over time may be for internal transformation. Given the power structure and totalitarian controls, no one expects an imminent “Korean Spring.” But general attitudes may shift over time, creating pressure for liberalization even within the elite.

The border with China has grown more permeable in recent years and outside information increasingly seeps in. Pyongyang looks very different from a quarter century ago, with private cars, cell phones, stylish clothing, and more Westerners behaving in ways inconsistent with the regime’s traditional message. Dealing with foreigners likely offers another revealing contact with the outside world. In some cases personal relationships form, especially with repeat visitors. The useful result is to provide information and arouse curiosity.

Tours with multiple participants and guides offer the greatest opportunity for informal contact. In North Korea I chatted with a British tourist who was on his third visit and assisted by some of the same guides as before. The point is not to oversell the benefits: Revolution doesn’t appear to be in the air and elites most likely to meet Westerners are the least likely to lead one. Nevertheless, that doesn’t mean attitudes can’t shift, with an impact over the long-term. Even a bit of *perestroika* and *glasnost* would help, and those having some contact with the West might become agents of at least modest change. My favorite experience was leaving my room for breakfast and hearing Christian worship music: Members of a humanitarian group had gathered in the common area to sing and pray before heading out for the day. More rather than fewer such experiences are needed.

For Western nations, especially the U.S., which has no diplomatic presence in Pyongyang, tourists are a useful source of information and experiences. Not military intelligence, mind you, but social mores, economic practices, development levels, health needs, ongoing changes, and more. Sometimes unscripted moments offer important insight into a system that to most people justifies the traditional label “Hermit Kingdom.”

In fact, that term no longer applies to the DPRK, in part because of tourism. My British friend was planning helicopter and micro-light tours over the North Korean capital. That would have been inconceivable not many years ago. No one gains from an attempt by Washington to return the North to its more isolated past.

Finally, there’s the basic issue of individual liberty. Admittedly, this concept receives little respect on Capitol Hill. But the right to travel is fundamental. Americans should be allowed to explore the world, make friends, take risks, gain experiences, and more—even if doing so inconveniences Washington. Absent a direct harm to America or other Americans, Congress and

the administration should respect that freedom. It's certainly fair to warn travelers that they cannot count on the U.S. cavalry to arrive if they get into trouble. But adventuresome folks should be left alone to behave in ways others might view as stupid and irresponsible.

Otto Warmbier's death was both tragic and unnecessary. But hard cases rarely offer a good basis for policy. Most Americans will never go, or even want to go, to North Korea. Allow the few to trek to a different world which almost certainly will fill them with greater appreciation for the U.S.

Doug Bandow is the Senior Fellow and former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan.