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Seeing North Korea From The Inside: Dedicated To The Supreme Leader And Nuclear Weapons

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It doesn't take long after arriving in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to realize that you're not in Kansas anymore. There are multiple portraits of deceased Great Leader Kim Il-sung and Dear Leader Kim Jong-il. Every North Korean official wears a pin picturing one or both Kims. Customs personnel count books carried in by visitors. All this before reaching the terminal arrivals area.

Of course, there's a dark side to what seems almost comic to most Westerners. The imprisonment and death of Otto Warmbier offers a stark warning of the risk of visiting the DPRK. Three Americans remain in custody, along with 13 other foreigners. Behind them is the brutal oppression of an entire population.

However, the vast majority of visitors to the North, including about 1000 Americans a year, have no problems. In fact, getting arrested requires a misstep, though it may seem trivial in the Western mind, such as stealing a political poster.

North Koreans set the rules and say they only punish intentional offenses. This claim was surprisingly backed by the head of a Christian NGO which works in the DPRK. She told me the group had investigated every case in which an American was incarcerated; everyone had done something to attract the regime's ill attention. That doesn't mean they deserved punishment, of course, but suggests Pyongyang wasn't trolling for hostages, as suggested by some.

Even with a scripted program visiting the North is educational. My latest trip—I first went in 1992—reaffirmed the fact that DPRK officials are neither crazy nor suicidal. The system is unusual at best, bizarre at worst. But an internal logic drives foreign as well as domestic policy.

The Leader (whether Great and Dear, as in the past, or Supreme, like today) is central; everything and everyone revolves around him. The people are one with the Leader. The regime is equated with the (united) nation and must be preserved. Outside threats must be met with force. Most North Korean actions, however strange their appearance and whatever their human cost, are consistent with these precepts.

Nuclear weapons dominate the West's attention, but my conversations offer little hope for a negotiated settlement, which will surprise few analysts. Officials unapologetically defended their nuclear and missile programs which, they said, were made necessary by America's "hostile

policy," highlighted by military and nuclear threats. The latter, they complained, dates from the 1950s. America is over there, North Korea is not over here.

Of course, it's not easy to disentangle beliefs from propaganda, but it's been said that even paranoids have enemies. Pyongyang is aware of South Korean threats to march north dating back to Syngman Rhee. North Koreans see military exercises which concentrate allied forces. DPRK officials cite South Korean plans targeting their supreme command and intended to decapitate the leadership. They point to U.S. campaigns for regime change in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.

Obviously this narrative is self-serving and leaves out the DPRK's behavior. But allied power does threaten the Kim regime. Nuclear weapons offer the only sure deterrent. Why, they ask, should they give up their nukes?

However, they admit that even receipt of such assurances would not cause them to yield their nuclear weapons. What if the U.S. abandoned its "hostile policy" as they demanded, I asked? One of my interlocutors said the North might consider disarming if all the other nuclear powers eliminated their weapons as well. Which means they intend a nuclear North to be a permanent reality.

What to do? Preventative war is inconceivable—Seoul is too vulnerable to attack—and sanctions have yet to work. In Washington, at least, China is seen as a miracle drug to cure the North Korean malady.

In fact, the People's Republic of China has surprisingly little clout in Pyongyang. These days the PRC and North Korea are at best frenemies. But divisions between the two states go back to the Korean War. The DPRK never gave Beijing credit for the latter's regime-saving support.

The Victorious Fatherland War Museum, which includes the USS Pueblo stationed on the nearby river, reflects North Korea's view of the conflict. Exhibits highlight Marshall Kim Il-sung's improbable triumph over U.S. imperialists, South Korean puppets, and European satellites. (Pyongyang also sports its own Arch of Triumph, bigger than the French version, to celebrate the same victory.) Yet I saw not a single mention of China's role, even though the People's Liberation Army sustained a half million or more casualties in the conflict.

Still, many Americans believe, if only Beijing would crack down on trade and aid, then the DPRK would fold. Unsurprisingly, North Korean officials said they desire to diversify their economic partners so that the DPRK is not dependent on "any one nation." They dismissed the possibility of Beijing joining with America to toughen sanctions. But it wouldn't matter if China did so, they added, since under the "wise leadership of the Supreme Leader" they would stand united and overcome any challenge.

And they might resist. A half million or so people starved to death in the late 1990s and Kim Jong-il, the current ruler's father, refused to change course. I didn't get to the countryside on this trip, but those who travel there say it has changed far less than the capital. The regime might survive tougher sanctions and even a Chinese embargo by again sacrificing the rural population.

However, Kim Jong-un, unlike his father and grandfather, appears to be following China's advice in reforming the economy, hoping to make the country into "an economic power," as one official put it. Unfortunately, Kim has ignored Beijing's counsel by continuing nuclear testing and accelerating missile development. Kim's Byungjin program envisions both nukes and economic growth.

Ironically, Pyongyang's evident economic progress—new buildings, private cars, cell phones, better clothes, and more—suggests that the DPRK might be vulnerable to more economic pressure. (Despite these changes, the country remains desperately poor: the countryside has changed far less than the capital.)

Apparatchiks, at least, now have more to lose. Thus, sanctions might hit harder. Still, this supposes that Beijing goes along. Despite his initial high hopes, President Trump recently said reliance on the PRC "has not worked out." And absent a major diplomatic initiative which addresses China's interests, Beijing isn't likely to do the administration's bidding.

Otto Warmbier's sad fate has led to calls to ban tourism to the North and his tour company said it would no longer accept Americans. Still, there is value in preserving even a small North Korean opening to the rest of the world. Visitors learn something about a system which is simultaneously threatening and mysterious. In doing so, they also gain an increased appreciation for the West, despite its manifold flaws.

Moreover, personal contact, especially the more extended, less formal ties developed within tourist groups, plants seeds for the possible future transformation of North Korea. Visiting Westerners impart information and encourage curiosity. Engagement will not directly change the system, but isolation only reinforces the status quo. Ultimately the best hope for the North might be change from within, however improbable it might seem.

Reform will not come easily to the DPRK. As much as those outside desire to see it change, it is those inside who most need a freer, more humane North Korea.

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