



## **Don't ban travel to North Korea — openness educates both sides**

Doug Bandow

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The administration plans to revive Cold War restrictions on travel to North Korea. The “land of the free” will bar Americans from visiting a country most everyone else on earth can enter. Doing so is a needless assault on Americans’ liberty. Doing so also closes a small window into one of the least accessible and understood nations on earth.

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is a totalitarian communist monarchy. It locks up its 25 million people in a national prison and unsettles Northeast Asia with its nuclear program.

However, isolation has failed to halt the North’s weapons program, improve treatment of its people, or promote domestic reform. Refusing to talk to North Korea has not turned Pyongyang into a friendly and responsible member of the international community. Threatening Americans who travel to the DPRK won’t change the Kim dynasty. A ban won’t even shut off travel — invalidating U.S. passports for visiting the North can’t stop North Korea from accepting them as travel documents.

Indeed, the administration’s travel ban looks like a desperation move by a president who promised decisive action against the North but was mugged by reality. Military action likely would trigger the Second Korean War, with horrific consequences. Economic threats against China won’t force a nationalistic government to sacrifice its basic security. Additional sanctions would cause the DPRK economic pain, but probably not enough to force it to disarm while facing a government which routinely imposes “regime change.” Banning travel appears to be doing something, even though it’s actually a step backward.

Of course, Washington poses as Americans’ protector: “The safety and security of U.S. citizens overseas is one of our highest priorities,” said State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert. But the administration does not prevent people from visiting conflict zones and regions prone to kidnapping.

Nor has the government barred travel to other nations where failing to follow the rules may result in a result similar to that in North Korea. For instance, don’t fly to Pakistan and tell your hosts what you really believe about the Prophet Mohammed. You likely will be murdered by a mob

before the police get you behind bars. If you visit Russia, don't desecrate the local Orthodox church or you'll spend time as a reluctant guest of the government.

Pyongyang really isn't attracting Americans for the purpose of kidnapping them. The regime is evil, but that doesn't mean it is guilty of every offense charged. About a thousand Americans visit every year. One was arrested last year. Of 15 Americans held since 2009, only four were tourists. And all of them violated North Korean laws.

Obviously that doesn't mean they deserved what happened to them. But when North Korean officials say that they penalize intentional, not accidental actions, the evidence bears them out.

Indeed, the head of a U.S. NGO doing humanitarian work in the North told me that they had assessed the case of every American detained. All had done something. Nothing an American would view as warranting punishment, of course. But entering the DPRK puts one under its authority.

The rules may be arbitrary, but most visitors follow them and come home. Even Medeiros of the Eurasia Group argued that "American citizens need to hear very strong signals about how dangerous it is to travel to North Korea," but it really isn't. Three other Americans currently are in detention and none were tourists. A couple of them are suspected of evangelism. Not much is known about the other.

Of course, tourist travel is dismissed as frivolous "adventure" travel. But some visits are serious — last month I traveled to Pyongyang at the invitation of the Institute for American Studies of the Foreign Minister. Moreover, the essence of a free society is allowing people to "pursue happiness" so long as they aren't interfering with the lives of others. Which means flying off to report on the Syrian civil war. Free climbing Yosemite's El Capitan. Becoming a cage fighter. Or visiting North Korea.

Moreover, visiting a country such as the DPRK educates both ways. It is hard to come away from the North without having a greater appreciation on the liberal values of the West. Putting North Koreans in contact with Americans also helps educate the former, dispelling the pervasive demonization of the U.S. No one should have any illusion about transforming the North from the outside. Absent regime collapse or military defeat, the reigning elites will not be easily displaced.

A better hope may be internal transformation, as difficult as that will be. Increasing North Korean contact with outsiders doesn't guarantee change, but may be the best means of encouraging positive evolution. At least engagement has better odds of working than more isolation.

Of course, the North holding Americans is inconvenient for Washington. But, in practice, the U.S. government rarely has given much of value to the DPRK to win their release. The Obama administration apparently offered nothing in return for Warmbier's release. That angered his parents, but was the best way to reduce the political value of holding Americans. U.S. citizens should be able to freely travel the world — at their own risk. They should not be able to drag America into controversy and conflict.

These days Washington takes individual liberty very lightly. Visiting the DPRK probably is not on many Americans' bucket list, but those who want to go should be allowed to do so. They

aren't going to solve "the North Korea problem," but they will have a more positive impact than those seeking to ban travel.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of "Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World" and co-author of "The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea."*