



South Korea Shouldn't Endorse North Korea's Explosive Bullying

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Dictators are notoriously touchy when it comes to criticism. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is no exception. Expressing anything less than extreme admiration of the supreme leader risks a lengthy prison stay. The latest spat with South Korea has produced a literally explosive reaction from North Korea, which blew up the inter-Korean liaison office in the village of Kaesong, on the northern side of the border.

North Korea has very clearly signaled that talking is futile and that it's back to bullying to get what it wants—and Seoul is only encouraging it. Now the South Korean government is preparing to do Pyongyang's dirty work by forbidding private groups from sending political tracts to North Korea. This cowardly decision sacrifices citizens' basic rights and encourages North Korea to make additional demands.

Seoul's policy toward North Korea was unremittingly hostile and counterproductive for a long time, changing significantly only with former President Kim Dae-jung's visit to Pyongyang in 2000. Travel to the North was mostly prohibited, increasing the allure of North Korea to some. The Republic of Korea would have done better to send its domestic critics on holiday to Pyongyang. There's nothing quite like seeing the other side close up.

The government of President Moon Jae-in has tried a very different approach, following on the earlier Sunshine Policy of the 1990s and 2000s, and ties between the two Koreas improved dramatically in 2018. However, the relationship cratered along with last year's Hanoi summit. North Korea now alternates between ignoring and insulting South Korea.

In contrast, South Korea remains silent. In the past, it matched the North's tactics, using high-powered speakers to broadcast propaganda and K-pop music across the Demilitarized Zone. But in 2018 Seoul unplugged its propaganda operations to promote detente with North Korea.

Private groups did not halt their activities, however. One of their favorite techniques was to send leaflets by balloon into the North. It is impossible to know how many are read and what impact they have. Still, angry complaints from Pyongyang suggest that the regime is unnerved by uncensored information seeping into North Korea.

That also was evident on June 4, when Kim Yo Jong, Kim Jong Un's sister, who is de facto head of the North's propaganda efforts, issued a statement through the Korean Central News Agency demanding that Seoul halt leaflet campaigns and threatening countermeasures should it not comply. She called critics "rubbish-like mongrel dogs" and "human scum little short of wild animals," and demanded that South Korea "take care of the consequences of evil conduct."

In her statement, Kim Yo Jong blamed the South: "If they truly value the north-south agreements and have a will to thoroughly implement them, they should clear their house of rubbish, before thoughtlessly blowing the 'supporting' bugle." Moreover, she threatened, "the south Korean authorities will be forced to pay a dear price if they let this situation go on while making sort of excuses."

She said the North might initiate the "complete withdrawal" from joint projects, including Kaesong Industrial Park, close the inter-Korean liaison office, and drop "the north-south agreement in military field which is hardly of any value." The next day Pyongyang said it was ending its participation in the liaison office: "The nonstop disposal of dirty rubbish from the South side has exhausted us so much as to come to a clearer conclusion that enemies are enemies after all," a spokesman declared.

Finally, on June 9 the North cut connections between the two Koreas, severing "the East and West Seas communication lines between the militaries of the north and the south, the inter-Korean trial communication line and the hotline." North Korea explained that "this measure is the first step of the determination to completely shut down all contact means with south Korea and get rid of unnecessary things." More missives have followed, along with the explosive closure of the (empty) liaison office on Tuesday.

North Korea has played the game skillfully, ratcheting up pressure on a skittish South Korean government. Panic appears to have afflicted South Korean officials.

After the two Koreas signed the Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification on the Korean Peninsula at the first summit between Moon and Kim Jong Un, the Moon administration ordered South Korean groups to halt their propaganda activities. However, the Seoul government did little to enforce its edict—admittedly no easy task, since activists easily evaded the police when launching balloons.

More than two years passed without Pyongyang taking much notice. But after Kim's outburst the spokesman for South Korea's Ministry of Unification, Yoh Sang-key, complained that the balloon launches "led to the creation of tension in the border area" and, less convincingly, "are risking the life and property of citizens of the border area" and therefore should be banned. Just hours after her statement the ministry said legislation was being prepared to outlaw the practice. The ruling party's large National Assembly majority should guarantee passage of the measure.

The next day a group of mayors of border cities complained that activists "threaten the life and property of the border area residents" and urged the Moon government to take "strong measures" to halt the practice. That included arranging "fundamental solutions as soon as possible, such as preparing legislation to include such measures that can punish those who break such measures."

The same day police blocked a Christian nongovernmental organization from launching bottles filled with Bibles, food, and vitamins by sea toward North Korea.

The North contends that the 2018 pact bars such activities. However, Pyongyang has no grounds to complain: North Korea has flagrantly ignored its commitments and treated the South with flamboyant disdain. Kim Yo Jong's rant provided an excellent opportunity for Moon to insist on reciprocity.

That probably would have triggered another outburst, but the point would have been made. No doubt, South Korea's craven response reflected its fear that relations would deteriorate further. However, there is little reason to believe that the leaflet issue would have any meaningful impact on bilateral relations.

Over the past year or so the North has demonstrated ever greater hostility to South Korea. The former downgraded its involvement in the liaison office, resumed short-range missile tests, demanded the removal of buildings at the Kungang resort, and criticized Seoul for multiple reasons, big and small. Kim apparently has decided that Seoul is powerless to move forward with economic cooperation because of U.S. and U.N. sanctions. Thus, the contretemps about the leaflets is more symptom than cause, merely the latest cudgel used by North Korea to bash Seoul. For Pyongyang, alleged South Korean perfidy and faithfulness are useful explanations for the breakdown of the North-South relationship.

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In fact, a statement attributed to the United Front Department dismissed South Koreans who believed Kim Yo Jong's earlier remarks indicated a desire to restart talks, calling it a "pipe dream that the north seems to hope for dialogue and negotiations." Even if the South follows Pyongyang's orders, Seoul will remain a hopelessly besotted yet perennially frustrated suitor.

The hasty move to outlaw leafletting has several negative consequences. The Moon government sacrificed its dignity and its citizens' freedom, no small matters. Moreover, Seoul abandoned its leverage, which Pyongyang revealed to be substantial. The North fears propaganda directed at its citizens. Instead of shutting down such activities, the South should encourage them. Then Seoul could indicate that it would be happy to discuss the issue—once the other side restores a bilateral dialogue.

Worse, the alacrity with which the South genuflected invited further bullying, as today's destruction showed. What next will North Korea assert interferes with relations—which it has no apparent intention of improving? Is there anything the Moon government will not sacrifice to satisfy Pyongyang? It would be surprising if the Kims do not test South Korea again, and soon. The Moon government has vindicated opposition claims that it is far too eager to engage the North.

In contrast, a tougher response would have punished the Kim regime for its arrogant behavior. The fact that the supreme leader's sister took the lead on the issue might have reflected domestic

concerns, perhaps an attempt to demonstrate toughness in order to burnish her leadership credentials. Seoul could have demonstrated that the North's attempt at intimidation failed and the Moon government won't be a willing political prop for the Kims.

Indeed, the South should publicize the incident to counteract past media treatment of Kim Yo Jong as a glamorous celebrity. Her snarling attack befits an unreconstructed apparatchik, not a putative reformer ready to lead her country into a new era. The Moon government should criticize actions and rhetoric from Pyongyang so inconsistent with those of Kim Jong Un two years ago.

Engagement with North Korea remains the best approach for South Korea (and the United States), but that does not mean submissively kowtowing when the North's leaders return to a policy of insults and intimidation. Seoul enjoys a position of strength and should respond accordingly. Unless the other side becomes a better negotiating partner, the South should allow the balloons to keep flying.

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