



Time To Open Nongovernmental Contacts with North Korea

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On August 28, the State Department announced that it was extending the travel ban to North Korea for another year. Separately, the Trump administration continues to prohibit North Koreans from visiting the United States.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that his department “has determined that there continues to be serious risk to United States citizens and nationals of arrest and long-term detention representing imminent danger to their physical safety.” In fact, despite the unfortunate fate suffered by Otto Warmbier, there was no evidence of intentional torture.

Only a handful of Americans ever got in trouble visiting the North—by forgetting that they were not in Canada or Denmark and violating the well-known rules. Moreover, the Trump-Kim summits make the North far more likely to treat Americans gingerly in the future. In any case, it is far more dangerous for Americans to go to Afghanistan or Syria (which I have visited) or Yemen or Libya (which I have not). Yet it remains legal for Americans to head to these countries.

Few other contacts exist between America and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). A handful of aid workers got past State’s gatekeepers pre-coronavirus, but virtually every other private trip to the North remained impossible. And there never have been official diplomatic relations between the two countries. With the deadlock after the failed Hanoi summit, contacts of any sort between the governments diminished.

Unfortunately, substantive negotiations may prove impossible for months. There is little expectation of any movement before the election. If Trump loses, Pyongyang is likely to write off his administration and might stage one or another provocation to gain leverage in dealing with President-to-be Joe Biden. In any case, Biden would not likely address the North immediately absent a crisis. He would be staffing his administration and reconsidering existing policy. Moreover, other issues, such as Iran, given the imminent end of President Hassan Rouhani’s term in office, would take priority.

Isolation is a stupid policy. It reinforces existing policies and personalities. It enshrines incentives for bad behavior. It strengthens demands for toughness, determination, commitment, and resistance. It isn’t really a policy. It certainly is not a successful policy.

Now, preparatory either to his own reelection or what could be a lengthy interregnum before a new administration takes over, President Donald Trump should connect the two countries, preparing for the time when public negotiations and private contacts again will become possible.

First, the president should send a “love letter” to Kim proposing the opening of liaison offices. Many U.S. policymakers treat diplomatic recognition as a reward, as if only the nicest, best, and finest abroad get to talk to an American ambassador. Official ties are the ultimate practical tool in international relations. Washington typically has maintained diplomatic contact with the worst foreign governments so long as the two nations are not actively fighting—such as the Soviet Union during the entire Cold War.

Where the United States has attempted to weaponize recognition, embassies, and relations, its policy has failed. Washington broke ties with Cuba for two decades, later opening a reduced “interests section.” America refused to recognize the People’s Republic of China (PRC) for three decades. The DPRK was founded seventy-two years ago and has never had official relations with America. In none of these cases did Washington’s stance either oust the opposing regime or force it to reform. Instead, the United States found it difficult to communicate with them even over mundane matters.

Cuba is but ninety miles from the United States. There were plenty of problems between the two nations, especially during the Cold War, but no means for the two governments to defuse them. In October 1950, the PRC entered the Korean War to halt America’s victorious and seemingly inexorable advance. With no official communication channels open, Beijing had attempted to send a warning message through India, which had no impact. As for the North, even today Washington has no easy means to discuss anything from security issues to travelers’ woes.

The irony with such foolhardy attempts at isolation is that it is most important to talk with the most dangerous regimes. Given proximity, Cubans and Americans inevitably will come into contact in some fashion, making official communication a necessity. China was second only to the Soviet Union in dangerous communist regimes during the Cold War. Imagine if the United States had no relations with the Soviet Union when the two nations’ militaries confronted each other around the globe. And President Donald Trump’s misguided “fire and fury” campaign against the North apparently came closer than many people realize to igniting a real war in late 2017. Whatever the overall state of U.S.-North Korean relations, the two governments should have a means to talk beyond media pronouncements.

Also important is promoting private contacts in all forms. This reflects no illusion that friendly personal relations are more important than government policies in a totalitarian regime like that in the North. However, interactions are useful. If nothing else, they provide greater knowledge about other societies, particularly useful when it is a country that is easily caricatured.

Before I made my first trip to the North in 1992, I read comments from an analyst who claimed that no trucks were allowed in Pyongyang, so as not to sully its image. The city had more trucks than cars. When I returned from that trip someone at State asked me if people there wore socks. He said most of the photos they saw only showed North Koreans from the waist up, leading to the conclusion that the regime was hiding the fact that it produced no socks. North Koreans wore socks, I assured him.

Moreover, the DPRK is changing and is more permeable today. Cross-border traffic with China has been great, most North Koreans have seen at least some South Korean films and TV shows, and cell phones allow illicit foreign communication. Kim Jong-un is serious about desiring economic growth. His government has invested in science and education. Markets are common and have helped counteract the state's incapacities and inefficiencies.

Moreover, the regime puts on a better outward face. Diplomats are professional. Kim appears committed to negotiation as an important policy tool. Washington should see private activity as one aspect of the long game to change North Korea in the future. Complained Jennifer Deibert of the Mennonite Central Committee: "restrictions on travel to the DPRK undermine the chances for building a more positive future between the people of the DPRK and the U.S. That can only be built through relationships, through face-to-face interactions."

Finally, the administration should welcome DPRK citizens to America. Of course, a tourist trade is unlikely. More important initially, at least, is sending a welcoming message to the Kim regime. Although anything said by Pyongyang must be treated skeptically, the North is correct to perceive a "hostile policy" by Washington. The regime would be foolish to believe that such a deep-rooted approach had disappeared after a couple of summits. Yet it is inconceivable that Kim would denuclearize if he still considered America to be a hostile power. Dropping travel restrictions would be an important symbolic step, even if it had no practical impact, at least in terms of North Koreans coming to the United States.

Overall Washington's policy toward Pyongyang is brain-dead. Imposing ever tougher sanctions on a proud, nationalistic regime does not modify behavior. Increasingly isolating a nation that you want to engage the world and become more like other nations does not work. And making the international environment more threatening while expecting the government to disarm always backfires. Yet, when this process fails, Washington simply repeats it.

Give Trump credit, he tried something different when he met Kim Jong-un. Win or lose in November, the president should not give up trying. He still has time to win that Nobel Peace Prize!

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