

Korea Times

April 1, 2012 Sunday

'Common sense' on North Korea

By Casey Lartigue, Jr.

As interesting as Kookmin University professor Andrei Lankov's writings are, there is nothing quite like attending one of his lectures. He can barely restrain himself behind the podium, often pointing and waving his arms. I also enjoy his unscripted speeches, but his answers in Q&A sessions are like the difference between watching Michael Jordan shoot baskets in warm-ups and an actual game.

I have finally discovered the secret behind Lankov's consistently solid analysis about North Korea: Use common sense.

At an Asan Institute conference last summer, he argued that North Korea watchers should try to understand North Korea from its perspective. Don't most people know that you must understand the mindset of others you are dealing with? Yet, common sense in theory gets ignored politically. From the North Korean perspective, nuclear weapons are the best thing they've got going. They will NOT give them up easily, even if President Obama asks nicely.

Lankov also argues strongly for increasing exchanges with North Koreans. At a roundtable discussion I hosted at the Center for Free Enterprise last Sept. 28, Prof. Lankov went into detail about the development of markets in North Korea. North Korean leaders recognize the danger of allowing North Korean citizens to become more independent by engaging in trade. A common sense approach would encourage more of that.

One of my favorite quotes is from philosopher Eric Hoffer: "It is not actual suffering but a taste of better things which excites people to revolt.' You don't hurt a hermit by locking him in his room or threatening to starve a man who has lived with starvation for years or decades. It is the taste of the good life or knowledge about alternatives that motivates people.

At the March 20 opening conference of the E.U.-Korea Human Rights and Democratic Transition Dialogue Program, Prof. Lankov insisted that a key strategy in dealing with North Korea: "Introduce information about the outside world!!!"

But policymakers "fight fire with fire.' Stephen Linton of the Eugene Bell Foundation pointed out at a **Cato Institute** event in 2010 that countries tend to adopt North Korea's tactics. "South Korea tries to approach North Korea the way North Korea approaches South Korea, by funneling everything through government ministries, by strangling in a sense or denying its private sector full participation,' Linton said. The result is too much government, not enough private sector activity in dealing with North Korea.

So what would be common sense from countries like the United States and South

Korea? For one, scrap non-military sanctions and encourage market activity in legal products. Lankov argues that North Korea's leaders regret allowing the Gaesong Industrial Complex because it is 'infected' North Korean workers. He encourages more exposure.

Two, not blocking private organizations or discouraging them from sending leaflets, radios, computers, music videos, movies, books, setting up businesses, and other activities that will increase the flow of information to North Korean citizens.

Three, South Korea and the United States opening their doors to North Koreans. America and South Korea should welcome the 'huddled masses' from North Korea yearning to breathe free, regardless of international agreements on refugees and asylum seekers.

Politicians looking to the next election don't always use common sense. During World War II, author H. L. Mencken called for the resettlement of Jews who were being terrorized by the Nazis. It was a sensible policy that would have saved many people, but the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration dragged its feet (Mencken blasted FDR for that).

Today, the world is faced with another humanitarian crisis, despite promises of 'never again.' It will be a tragedy if politicians continue engaging in chess matches with North Korea rather than remaining focused on common sense policies.

The writer is director for international relations at the Center for Free Enterprise. He blogs at www.cfekorea.com.