

The Korea Times

Pay heed to North Koreans

By Casey Lartigue, Jr.

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This is the eighth in a "Letter to President Biden" series aimed at conveying policy recommendations through open letters from politicians, scholars and experts to the new U.S. president following his Jan. 20 inauguration. — ED.

Dear Mr. President,

You may not recall it, but we met a few times about 20 years ago when I first started working at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. You have worked at high levels in Washington, D.C., over the past 48 years, so it is understandable that you don't recall or may have forgotten.

As you become the latest U.S. president to deal with North Korea, you will be working at the highest political level with politicians, diplomats, and analysts. I would hope that you all would recall some of the most forgotten people in this world: North Koreans.

I know that isn't completely fair, and I am a bit biased because I am working directly with former North Koreans who have escaped to South Korea. North Korean citizens do get mentioned sometimes. I have attended conferences with politicians, diplomats and analysts mentioning North Korean refugees in passing, at the end, or in response to a question. Not completely forgotten, but not a priority.

You will be leading a new administration. Is there any reason to believe things will be different? As you often say to people asking challenging questions: "C'mon man!"

When you joined the U.S. Congress in 1973, Kim Il-sung was 25 years into his reign as dictator of North Korea. In 1994, when you were in your 21st year as a U.S. senator, Kim Il-sung finally died after 46 years of rule and was succeeded by his son Kim Jong-il. In 2011 after you had served 35 years in the U.S. Senate and when you were vice president of the U.S., Kim Jong-il finally died and was succeeded by his son Kim Jong-un.

Perhaps you have a strategy related to North Korea that you have kept under wraps since 1973 but will now unveil as president.

During your long political career, there have been nine U.S. presidents that preceded you, numerous diplomats and analysts, foreign ministers and prime ministers in numerous countries. North Korean citizens were rarely discussed, although a few, most notably former Republican presidents Donald Trump and George W. Bush did openly meet with North Korean refugees (including some of my friends and students).

High-level officials say they avoid mentioning North Korean refugees because it could irritate the North Korean dictator, who apparently gets easily agitated about North Koreans who want freedom. Are there some things that could be done differently during your presumed one term?

One: Make it easier for North Korean refugees to obtain asylum in the U.S. Whereas South Korea treats North Korean escapees as North Korean refugees, the U.S. treats them as "refugees." From what I have heard, North Korean refugees in countries like Thailand or Cambodia need to decide which country they will go to next.

They need to wait about a month before they are flown to South Korea (an additional six or so months of investigations and education in South Korea after that), it takes more than a year to 18 months for North Korean refugees to be accepted to the U.S. Couldn't that process be streamlined in preparation for a post-COVID-19 world?

In 2004, President Bush signed the North Korean Act of 2004, paving the way for North Korean refugees to be able to go directly to the U.S. More than 200 North Korean refugees have done so, including several friends and participants in my organization.

That is just a handful every year, but that number all but stopped under President Trump who met with North Korean refugees but didn't make it easier for North Koreans to move to the U.S. You are reversing many Trump policies that would be one approach worth changing.

Two: Welcome North Korean refugees. This is different from the legal mechanisms. For example, South Korea has constitutionally already made North Koreans citizens of South Korea, but the challenge has been for North Koreans to get to South Korea to claim that status. Even with that protected status, former President Park Geun-hye welcomed North Korean refugees.

Several North Korean refugees I have met in the last few years said they felt welcome in South Korea after they heard about that. It might not be the only factor, but former North Korean diplomat Tae Yong-ho's call for high-level North Korean diplomats to escape may have played a similar role. If North Korea plays its usual tit-for-tat game by welcoming Americans to North Korea, then you could establish a citizen exchange program.

Three: Have more robust scholarship and engagement programs with North Korean refugees in South Korea and other countries. For now, it seems that most U.S. assistance is for North Korean refugees who have already escaped to the U.S. Ramp up relations with North Korean refugees around the world as a signal that the U.S. welcomes them and to broaden their horizons.

You are president, but there is the reality of your advanced age in a new position. The young dictator of North Korea will already be dealing with his third U.S. president in less than a decade, and he will probably wait for the next leader rather than deal with you seriously. The Obama-Biden approach was "strategic patience," and apparently the same could be true of the North Korean dictators. You can make your mark in a different way: by highlighting North Korean citizens and refugees.

During those 48 years that you have been in Washington, D.C., there has been little focus at the presidential level on North Korean citizens under the boot of the Kim dictators. You could be the president to shift the discussion to focus on people typically forgotten once the high-level discussions start.

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