

The Importance of Human Rights for North Korea

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Thank you for that introduction Don. I would also like to thank Kim Hak-joon, the cosponsor of today's program. I would like to thank the U.S.-Korea Institute and the Hajeong Peace Foundation for organizing this event. I would also like to thank my good friend Jae Ku for the invitation to join you here today to talk about the aspect of the US-Korea relationship as it is -- or perhaps isn't -- that concerns my role as Special Envoy for Human Rights.

The topic of this conference, "Forging a 21st Century U.S.-Korea Alliance: Identifying Obstacles and Opportunities," is a significant one. I am going to talk about both some of the obstacles and what I see as some of the opportunities. And what I am going to focus on is the importance of human rights for North Korea and the importance of human rights as a key element in our dialogue -- our dialogue with North Korea and our dialogue with other interested countries in the region.

For a country renowned for its reclusive nature, North Korea has a way of staying in the news.

In July 2006 -- only a few days before I was supposed to get on a plane and travel to North Korea -- that regime tested ballistic missiles followed by its detonation of a nuclear device in October of that year. The regime was condemned by two UN Security Council Resolutions as a direct result.

Two weeks ago, headlines were again dominated by revelations of Pyongyang's assistance to Syria in building a nuclear facility at Al Kibar. At an unclassified background briefing on Capitol Hill, a senior intelligence official stated that, "The Syrians constructed this reactor for the production of plutonium with the assistance of the North Koreans."

But it is not only in the area of nuclear trafficking that North Korea is a concern. North Korea has counterfeited U.S. currency -- the first regime to do so since the Third Reich -- and also traffics in illegal drugs, among other illicit activities. The term "rogue state" is justly applied to North Korea.

But North Korea is not a menace only to the international community. Its own people suffer a worse fate -- a far worse fate -- under the so called "protection" of their own government.

Just last week, at the beginning of North Korean human rights week here in Washington, a North Korean soldier had stepped across the heavily militarized zone separating North and South Korea, and requested asylum. This case of directly crossing to South Korea is rare, but instances of North Korea people fleeing their own country are not.

Indeed, last week many North Korean defectors were in town to tell their own stories. One young man, Shin Dong-Hyok, was born inside a North Korean labor camp. His personal story of not even knowing that a life outside of the camps existed, testifies to the extent that North Korea represses its own people.

In March, a State Department report was issued illustrating how the entire nation has essentially been turned into a prison. The report documents systematic killing, detention, and torture of those whom the regime dislikes. It described a vast network of political concentration camps, which hold an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 people. And it spotlighted a society where literally every one of the fundamental freedoms we take for granted -- political speech, travel, religion, and assembly -- is simply prohibited. And it once again highlighted North Korea's past practice of abducting foreign nationals, specifically the 12 Japanese citizens abducted in the 1970s and 80s, and an estimated 480 South Korean civilians abducted since the end of the Korean War as well as hundreds South Korean POWs, still believed to remain alive.

Most of you know of the famine North Korea endured in the mid-1990s that killed an estimated 1 to 2 million people. Today, hunger and malnutrition are so common in North Korea that the military has eliminated its height requirement for soldiers, because not enough North Koreans could make the mark due to stunted growth as a direct result of malnutrition.

But why should we in the United States care about what happens inside North Korea?

First, we have an obvious, moral responsibility. We cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering of others and historically we have been a nation that focuses on the liberty of the individual -- be it at home or abroad.

But there are some -- there are some in our own country -- who will argue that we are wrong in this approach. Some view a focus on human rights as tantamount to a sort of new imperialism -- imposing our views on others and getting involved in the internal affairs of other nations. Others may not hold this strong of a view, but in the case of the Korean peninsula, will argue that human rights is a matter

to be solely worked out between the North and the South. Still others will say that security concerns are the highest priority -- specifically regarding North Korea's nuclear arsenal -- and a discussion of human rights will detract from progress on that front. I would say, at least with respect to the third argument, they are half right.

The arming of North Korea and its nuclear menace has to be the number one priority for the United States and for the rest of the world. But a discussion of human rights will not detract from our efforts in that area. On the contrary, I believe that human rights can be a means to an end.

In his Second Inaugural Address, President Bush stated, "We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands."

What we have found is that focusing on human rights goes far beyond being a moral imperative. It is a critical means to a broader end: America's effort to provide for our security and that of our allies. And therefore, helping North Koreans achieve freedom is not only a policy consistent with our moral values as a nation -- it is also a pragmatic security necessity.

Free nations are invested in the pursuits of peace, and are more likely to settle differences with other free nations peacefully. The opposite is all too often true with repressive nations. Often, they must antagonize other nations and invent enemies to justify their strong-arm rule at home. This is demonstrated with North Korea, which has on numerous occasions described how it might turn neighboring lands into a "sea of fire." In its propaganda, it frequently accuses the United States, South Korea and Japan of plotting to invade North Korea. Undemocratic regimes are also likely to be beholden to military or security forces to sustain their power, which impairs international security. This is certainly true in North Korea, where Kim Jong-il's "military first" policy attempts to ensure a relative degree of comfort for those who keep his regime in charge. Thus we see a link between governance and security.

Because of this increasingly apparent link between North Korea's treatment of its own people and its treatment of its neighbors -- which in this ever-shrinking world now essentially includes not only us, but also our allies in Asia and the Middle East -- any long-term effort to alleviate threats to peace caused by North Korea have to induce Pyongyang to begin human rights and other reforms. As Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov said in his 1975 Nobel lecture, "Peace, progress, human rights -- these three goals are insolubly linked to one another: it is impossible to achieve one of these goals if the other two are ignored." This linkage is key, and ought to form the basis of any future diplomatic path that is made available to Pyongyang by the international community.

But what are the practical steps we, the United States and the broader international community, can take to this end?

To be sure, humanitarian aid is crucial, particularly as North Koreans are jeopardized potentially by another famine. But humanitarian aid is only humanitarian aid if it reaches those who need it. The governments that provide North Korea with humanitarian assistance must insist that it verifiably reach those for whom it is intended. If it is not, then as nice as it may sound and feel to be providing humanitarian aid, those who are the donors, may in fact be propping up an illicit regime.

Pyongyang is certainly adept at diverting aid to its military and regime supporters. We know that donated goods often end up on the black market. South Korea and China, which provide the most aid to North Korea, should also insist on monitoring its distribution. Indeed, both those countries are also the largest trading partners with North Korea, and therefore they have leverage to use to promote an improvement in the regime's conduct.

The refugee situation should also weigh on the conscience of the international community. Specifically, the governments in Asia need to do more to help those fleeing North Korea. Many of these refugees escape to China merely in search of food, but since departing North Korea without permission is considered a crime by the regime, they are forced to live underground in China for fear of the dire consequences that forced repatriation will bring on them once they are returned to North Korea -- consequences as harsh as summary execution.

There are estimates as high as 100,000 or more of these refugees still in hiding in China. Because they cannot appeal to authorities, they are highly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation -- especially human trafficking. China, which is particularly under the spotlight right now for the Olympic Games which it is hosting, should halt its forced returns of North Korean asylum seekers, allowing them more open access to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and permit them to be resettled in South Korea or elsewhere. Indeed, by not doing so, China is violating its obligations under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. Today, China does not even permit the UN High Commissioner for Refugees access to Northeast China, where many of these refugees are located.

Many of the North Korean refugees utilize what is commonly called the "Underground Railroad" in order to leave China in an attempt to reach third countries like South Korea. Their journey can be perilous, and many die along the way. We ask all the governments hosting these refugees to allow UNHCR to access these individuals and refrain from forcibly repatriating them to North Korea. Although there is cooperation on this front, there are extensive delays in the process, and international cooperation is needed to prevent the suffering of these refugees fleeing North Korea.

The United States has a role to play here too. We have accepted a small number of North Korean refugees -- 48 since the North Korean Human Rights Act was passed. We need to accept more, we need to continue to honor our own heritage as a country where people fleeing persecution elsewhere will always be welcome.

Assistance in these areas -- providing humanitarian aid and helping refugees -- will have an immediate impact. But I would suggest that there is something even more consequential that the international community can and should be doing, to help bring about enduring change -- change from within the North Korean regime. And that is in the area of broadcasting.

Since I became Special Envoy, the annual expenditures for the Korean services of Radio Free Asia and Voice of America have been doubled. But we can and should do far more in this area, and I would call upon Congress to help us with the appropriate appropriations in order to fund these broadcasting services fully.

We have also witnessed the continued expansion of efforts by other independent broadcasters who are intent on helping the North Korean people find the truth -- something that terrifies the Kim Jong-il regime.

I remember over a year ago, sitting in the Oval Office with the President, when we were visited by the head of one of these radio organizations. Kim Sung-min, a defector from North Korea, described to us how, because of his position in the army, he was able to listen

to a foreign radio broadcast inside North Korea -- even though it was an illegal act. This began, for him, a personal awakening that ultimately led him to defect. He has now committed himself to helping those still inside North Korea.

We know of four non-governmental organizations -- Korean groups and one Japanese group -- who conduct separate broadcasts. But their job would be a great deal easier and their message would be heard by far more North Koreans, if they were able to transmit their signals from South Korea and Japan directly. The governments of these two nations could do more to help promote the pathway to peace in the region and a transformation of the North Korean regime, by providing access to transmission facilities as well as funding.

We know North Koreans are trying to listen to the outside world. A recent survey of defectors revealed that nearly one-half of that group had access to radios capable of receiving "illegal" foreign broadcasts that the regime has been unable to censor. Radios purchased in North Korea are required to be fixed to a state channel, but reports continue to indicate a proliferation of radios that have been altered or modified or smuggled in through China, so that the people in North Korea are, in fact, gaining access to information about the world.

But it is incumbent upon us, much as the way we did when we were speaking to the people behind the Iron Curtain in the 1960s and 70s, to broadcast--to tell the North Koreans about the world outside their walls.

Another way to censor broadcasts is to jam them. The North Korean government attempts to do this with some frequency. However, no jamming effort is perfect, and jamming requires lots of electricity, which North Korea is short on, and so the information is getting through. There are indications now that North Korea is more porous to information from the outside world than it has ever been before, and now is the opportunity for us to seize that moment and help awaken the North Korean people.

I also want to talk briefly about the changes in South Korea.

In South Korea recently, I have to say, I am very optimistic about the new government, led by President Lee Myung-bak. President Lee is sending the right messages about human rights in North Korea and the curtailment of economic largesse for the North Korean regime. Pyongyang recently expressed its displeasure at this by expelling South Korean government employees from the Kaesong Industrial Complex. President Lee's willingness to stick to his principles is commendable. We want to work with him in devising an approach toward North Korea that recognizes the importance of the regime's conduct toward its own citizens, and recognizes the linkage between human rights issues, economic issues, and military and strategic issues.

To be realistic about peace and security in northeast Asia, we must understand the links between the way a government treats its citizens and the way it treats its neighbors. Pluralistic societies benefit their citizens and also improve international stability. We and our negotiating partners should proceed with based on this assumption in order to advance human rights and realize an associated improvement in national security. Thank you.

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