



Why We Should Still Give Engagement a Chance in North Korea

In the past year, the security situation on the Korean Peninsula has shifted from bad to worse. North Korea not only tested its first intercontinental ballistic missile with the potential range to hit major U.S. cities, but it conducted its sixth nuclear test in September 2017. Each North Korean missile and nuclear test is met with additional calls for tighter sanctions against North Korea and isolation of the regime. Meanwhile, U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un have lobbed words at each other in a dangerous spiral of escalatory rhetoric. Under such conditions, one might conclude that this is the worst time for engagement with North Korea, whether this includes state-led diplomatic engagement between government officials, or civil society centered people-to-people engagement between non-state actors. In fact, on September 1, 2017 the U.S. government instituted a *de facto* travel ban on Americans by invalidating U.S. passports “for travel to, in, or through North Korea.” The traveler needs to apply for a special validations passport, issued primarily to Red Cross workers and the press, for “compelling humanitarian considerations” or for other travel in “the national interest.”

Contrary to popular beliefs, this essay makes a case for why people-to-people engagement still matters, and how it might help us think about diplomatic engagement with

North Korea. There are both moral and political reasons to continue people-to-people engagement with North Koreans, despite current restrictions issued by the U.S. government against travel to North Korea. Drawing a distinction between the North Korean people and its regime, ordinary North Koreans tend to bear the costs of the regime’s isolationist and autocratic policies. North Korea’s per capita GDP in 2015 was \$1,700. Basic political freedoms, including the freedom of movement, assembly, or speech are severely restricted. Nevertheless, everyday life goes on in North Korea, and signs of an emerging market economy suggest economic improvements in major cities, including Pyongyang. However, the regime’s policies still lead to constant food shortages, malnutrition, and chronic illnesses.

Stripping aside politics, the moral case for continuing people-to-people engagement is straightforward: to help improve the lives of ordinary North Koreans. Civil society actors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in such people-to-people engagement in North Korea are often motivated by a sense of mission that their work not only improves lives, but also fosters a sense of greater understanding between North Korea and the rest of the world. Examples of people-to-people engagement may include humanitarian assistance, such as the delivery of food aid and emergency supplies

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during periods of flooding and famine. It also takes the form of longer term, capacity-building projects. Projects and activities might include drilling wells, establishing greenhouses, providing technical assistance in the areas of agriculture and forestry, or operating tuberculosis and other health clinics. To a lesser extent, business operations with the goal of improving capacity and service, or meeting the everyday needs of North Koreans, also fall under the category of people-to-people engagement. Such business ventures have included the establishment of a noodle factory and the development of a logistics and transportation company to provide local bus service.

Several Christian and other faith-based organizations have made the case for pursuing people-to-people engagement including NGOs such as the Eugene Bell Foundation, Christian Friends Korea, Samaritan's Purse, and World Vision. Having cultivated long-standing partnerships in North Korea, and driven by a sense of higher purpose, some faith-based groups have managed to sustain operations for over two decades in North Korea.

For Christians, there is a higher calling, a sense of obligation to Christ's command to love our neighbors, and even our enemies, which comes into play. People-to-people engagement is much more than simply dropping bags of food aid or delivering medicine into North Korea. In addition to addressing real world problems, it calls on individuals and groups to build relationships and trust where mutual understanding may be absent. Actions often speak louder than words, and the work of several faith-based organizations has helped North Koreans trust outsiders (and vice-versa), despite these groups being conspicuously Christian and even coming from places such as the maligned, imperial (in the eyes of North Koreans) United States.

There are both moral and political objections against people-to-people engagement with the two objections often conflated. Critics argue that such engagement indirectly benefits the regime. Even if aid or development assistance is properly monitored and delivered to its intended targets (i.e. vulnerable populations and ordinary North Koreans), outside assistance enables the regime to redirect scarce resources needed to feed its people towards expanding its military capabilities. A fundamental point of disagreement among secular and faith-based groups alike working to improve human conditions in North Korea is whether outside assistance, including support from people-to-people engagement, ultimately props up the regime, thereby prolonging suffering among North Koreans.

Former U.S. President Ronald Reagan stated, "A hungry child knows no politics." This suggests our response to need and suffering should rise above politics. International politics, unfortunately, tends to be driven by the "is" rather than the "ought." However, just as there are moral and political objections against engagement initiatives, there are also justifications on moral and political grounds for taking action.

People-to-people engagement provides a low cost means for outsiders to generate positive relationships with North Koreans. Outsiders, some who have engaged with North Korean counterparts since the famine of the 1990s, have perhaps the best grasp of North Korean norms, culture, thinking, and knowledge of daily life. Meanwhile, people-to-people engagement offers North Koreans a channel for receiving information related to markets, business and legal practices, and capacity-building principles which may spur greater curiosity and a hunger for knowledge beyond what the state can provide. By fostering better communication and understanding between North Koreans and the outside world, people-to-people engagement may be laying the groundwork for potential transition, whether that be the gradual opening of North Korea through reforms, or future reunification.

Finally, the current nuclear standoff on the Korean Peninsula warrants keeping open any channels of dialogue which offer an off-ramp away from armed conflict. The Trump administration has sent mixed signals regarding North Korea, ranging from threats of annihilation to suggesting the possibility of direct talks with its leader [which are now being planned for May, 2018]. This has created confusion among both domestic and foreign audiences. However, in practice, the official policy of "maximum pressure and engagement" can be read as tightening sanctions but leaving a door open for engagement.

Although engagement here refers primarily to diplomatic engagement, it can and should include people-to-people engagement. It is unclear whether successful lower levels of engagement can translate into higher forms of engagement in North Korea. However, in the absence of diplomacy, people-to-people engagement is one of the few means of contact between Americans and North Koreans. Moreover, the longer term effects may be positive if attitudes of local cadres and provincial leaders towards Americans begin to shift. Finally, by encouraging low levels of engagement, the Trump administration can provide a diplomatic opening for the South Korean government to continue pursuing its desired strategy of inter-Korean engagement, even as Seoul and Washington continue to apply pressure on the North

Korean regime. For instance, South Korea recently approved \$8 million dollars of aid to the World Food Program and UNICEF directed towards providing nutrition to children and pregnant women, and vaccinations and treatment for diseases. While the timing of such goodwill gestures may be questioned given North Korea's continued expansion of its missile and nuclear program, and with critics labeling such actions as "appeasement," such gestures do signal to the regime that the path to engagement and dialogue still remains open.

Hard-nosed realists assume that the surest bet to survival includes maximizing a nation's military capabilities. This has been the path adopted by the North Korean regime, and at times exercised by the U.S. in the latest security standoff on the Korean Peninsula. However, realism, as a foreign policy guide, also calls for pragmatism and prudence in foreign policy. I do not suggest an end to economic sanctions or the removal of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula, all which serve an important purpose for deterrence, reassurance, and credibility in a region fraught by wider geopolitical and historical tensions. However, the current balance of sticks (that is coercion) and carrots (diplomatic engagement) has clearly not reduced tensions on the Peninsula. To provide an exit strategy from the current path of escalation and to avert an impending crisis, it may be more prudent to reshuffle the ratio of sticks to carrots to include more carrots (that is engagement) to persuade Pyongyang to return to the negotiating table. MF

- 8 Biblical verses include Luke 4:18; James 2:14-16; Isaiah 58:7
- 9 Of course, the regime has also benefited in the material sense from people-to-people engagement, therefore permitting faith-based NGOs to operate in North Korea. However, it is paradoxical that some of the longest serving organizations have been faith-based given the regime's relative intolerance towards religion. I suspect this has to do with the higher "tolerance" faith-based organizations are initially willing to put up with when confronted by bureaucratic challenges and North Korean demands. However, the durability of faith-based programs may also be attributed to greater familiarity and trust between local counterparts and foreign organizations.
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- 11 Quoted in Lim, Wonhyuk. 2006 "When in Doubt, Blame South Korea: The Politics of Food Aid to North Korea." *Brookings Institution*, February 16. www.brookings.edu/articles/when-in-doubt-blame-south-korea-the-politics-of-food-aid-to-north-korea/
- 12 Morgenthau, Hans. 1967 *Politics among Nations; the Struggle for Power and Peace*. 4th ed. New York; Knopf.
- 13 McCurry, Justin. 2017 "South Korea approves \$8m aid package for North Korea," *The Guardian*. September 21, www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/21/south-korea-approves-8m-aid-package-for-north-korea
- 14 Mearsheimer, John J. 2001 *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. 1st ed. New York: Norton.
- 15 Carr, Edward Hallett. 1946 *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*. 1st ed. London: Macmillan.

Endnotes

- 1 See US State Department's travel advisory to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK): travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/country/korea-north.html
- 2 A focus on engagement does not imply that coercive actions such as sanctions should be abandoned, nor does it imply that engagement is the only tool to improve relations with North Korea.
- 3 CIA World Factbook, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kn.html.
- 4 United Nations Human Rights Council. 2014 "Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations Human Rights Council.
- 5 Demick, Barbara. 2009 *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*. New York: Spiegel & Grau; Smith, Hazel. 2015 *North Korea: Markets and Military Rule*. NY: Cambridge University Press.
- 6 Yeo, Andrew I. 2017 "Evaluating the Scope of People-to-People Engagement in North Korea, 1995-2012." *Asian Perspective* 41:2, 309-39.
- 7 Zadeh-Cummings, Nazanin. 2017 "True believers: Faith-based NGOs in North Korea," March 14, www.nknews.org/2017/03/true-believers-faith-based-ngos-in-north-korea/

