

# The Case for Engaging North Korea

On March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) launched four ballistic missiles, three of which landed 200 miles off Japan's coastline. DPRK supreme leader Kim Jong-un promises nuclear-armed, intercontinental ballistic missiles that could reach the continental United States. The Trump administration is currently reviewing its policy options, such as preemptive strikes or total isolation of the North Korean economy.<sup>1</sup> Brookings fellow Evans J.R. Revere argues the rationale for total sanctions.<sup>2</sup>

A hard-line strategy is not likely to persuade the DPRK regime to give up its missiles and nuclear weapons. Nor will it garner the support of the South Korean public, which elected a center-left President (Moon Jae-in) on May 9, 2017. Most importantly, preemptive strikes or enhanced sanctions will delay ongoing economic reforms in North Korea and its integration into the global economy. Internal economic and social change is ultimately the only path to moderate the DPRK regime and its policies.

## Containment and Engagement

Since 2012, Kim Jong-un has pursued a dual strategy of nuclear deterrence and Chinese-style economic reforms. The prudent response of liberal democracies is to contain the military ambitions of North Korea *and* to support the belated integration of its citizens into global society. For instance, the USA and its Asian allies could continue their strategy of overt (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THADD) and covert (e.g., cyber-warfare) actions against

the DPRK military. At the same time, we should endorse the regime's move to a decentralized, market economy, such as increasing the legal autonomy of business enterprises and allowing farmers to cultivate private plots or *pojon* (vegetable garden).<sup>3</sup>

Kim Jong-un is belatedly recognizing and legalizing the people's de facto transition to a market economy, a process already started during his father Kim Jong-il's regime. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the devastating famine in the 1990s destroyed much of the top-down, governmental distribution system. To survive, ordinary North Koreans created non-governmental markets for goods and services, at first rudimentary and illegal, later more sophisticated and (at least partially) legal (Andrei Lankov analyzes the transformation in *Real North Korea* 2013; Felix Abt offers a first-hand account in *Capitalist in North Korea* 2012). With economic recovery and growth, the DPRK has developed an expansive transportation system and a nationwide cellular network, with more than 3 million subscribers,<sup>4</sup> which furthers the flow of goods and information.

North Koreans are increasingly aware and desiring of goods, information, and personal contacts from the outside world. Economic reforms offer legal space for foreign tourists, volunteers, businesses, and NGOs to contribute to social and economic development and to interact with ordinary citizens. Jamie Kim, director of Reah International,<sup>5</sup> has documented about 4000 activities carried out by 500 western organizations (governmental, NGO, private) from 2005 to 2012. Significantly, they included about 50, mostly

BY JOSEPH YI, BYEONGGEUN HEO AND JUNBEOM BAHK

**Joseph Yi** is associate professor of political science at Hanyang University (joyichicago@yahoo.com); his publications can be viewed at <https://hanyang.academia.edu/JosephYi>.

**Byeonggeun Heo** graduated from Hanyang University (political science).

**Junbeom Bahk** graduated from Vanderbilt University (economics). This article was supported by Hanyang University Research Fund.

small-staffed and USA-registered, faith-based organizations (FBOs), such as the American Friends Service Committee, the Eugene Bell Foundation and Global Resource Services.

Since 2012, many secular organizations have left North Korea because of international sanctions and reduction of western government funding. Faith-based organizations receive donations and voluntary labor from Christians and are relatively immune to the vagaries of government funding.<sup>6</sup>

Probably the most famous faith-based operation is the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology<sup>7</sup> (est. 2010). North Korea's first private university, PUST is largely funded by evangelical Christians in South Korea, the USA and other countries. About 60 foreign Christian volunteer professors instruct 500 undergraduate and 90 graduate students, who represent the academic elite of North Korea. A few students receive scholarships to study abroad in prestigious universities (e.g., University of Westminster and Cambridge University in Britain, Uppsala University in Sweden<sup>8</sup>). PUST has received much media coverage and controversy, including a BBC documentary.<sup>9</sup> Former PUST instructors such as Helen Kibby from New Zealand have also uploaded their own YouTube videos.<sup>10</sup>

One long-term PUST professor writes, "Although foreign faculty and North Korean students are both pretty guarded in general, their interaction is changing year by year. After PUST was opened in 2010, students didn't talk much with professors outside their classrooms for a while. As time went by, they built up trust with each other to some degree and the campus atmosphere got to warm up. That has helped them become more open to have closer conversations. Dynamic interaction between faculty and students happens during different contexts: class, lab and research, advising students, thesis defense, events and contests, sports day, eating lunch and dinner together at the cafeteria, etc. Nevertheless, there are always certain boundaries that they both are aware of to respect and protect each other overall."

The numbers and activities of FBOs have increased in recent years, especially entrepreneurs who combine nonprofit and business activities. Gabe\* (USA) organized North Korea's first surfing camp in partnership with the state-run travel company (Korea International Travel Company) and an American FBO (Surfing the Nations). The initial camp in 2014 (July 28 to Aug. 6) attracted 19 surfers, instructors and safety personnel from the United States, Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark and Australia to North Korea's east coast. The summer camp offers surfing and skating lessons and other cultural exchanges between local residents and foreign visitors (Korea Times, 27

August 2014). On August 2016, celebrity British vlogger Louis John Cole posted a YouTube video about the surfing camp,<sup>11</sup> which attracted more than 700,000 views and global media controversy (*Guardian*, *Forbes* August 18, 2016; *NBC News* Aug. 23, 2016).

Less publicized are the hundreds of small groups that legally visit North Korea through tourism companies. Kevin\* (USA) participated in a 16-person tour group, which planted 2,000 trees and conversed with students (in English) at a foreign language middle school in the Rason region near the Chinese border. Kevin was one of around 100,000 annual tourists to North Korea, the vast majority of whom are Chinese.<sup>12</sup> Kevin, Helen, Gabe, and Louis all find a deep longing among North Koreans, especially the younger and more-educated, to better themselves and to engage the outside world. They wish to inspire millions more international tourists, volunteers, and businesses to come to North Korea, develop its economy, and befriend its people.

A large body of academic literature finds a positive, symbiotic relationship between economic development and liberal democracy.<sup>13</sup> In particular, the growth of a stable middle class generates powerful demands for the rule of law (not of arbitrary rulers), more popular participation in politics and resistance to military adventurism.<sup>14</sup> Another body of literature stresses the moderating effects of interpersonal contact. People get to know each other as individuals rather than as representatives of disliked groups (e.g., DPRK, USA); and personal relations of trust and friendship erode one's dislike and prejudice of the disliked group.<sup>15</sup>

Any interaction between North Koreans and the outside world that increases information exchange and economic opportunity should be welcomed; these are the seeds that with time and nurturing sprout into stout trees of liberty. Andrei Lankov reminds us that the transformation of the former Soviet Union ultimately came from within, from citizens who were exposed first-hand to the West. Notably, two Soviet students selected by Moscow for the first study abroad in the USA in 1958 ultimately became the top leaders of the perestroika reforms in the late 1980s. Both men later said that their one-year experiences in the United States changed the way they saw the world.

## Let a Million Deals Bloom: The Imperfect Pakistan Model

The Trump administration should remember the enduring lure and power of liberty and the hunger of ordinary people to better their lives. As the administration pursues the "big deal" to contain DPRK nuclear weapons, it should also


support opportunities for ordinary North Koreans to trade, attend school, sell their produce, make foreign friends and to negotiate a million other “deals” to better their lives.

American hard-liners claim that enhanced sanctions forced Iran to the negotiating table and will do the same to North Korea. Iran is *not* a useful analogy. Iran possesses the most powerful military in the Middle East (outside of Israel),<sup>16</sup> and lacks a credible military threat from any of its immediate neighbors (especially after the US conveniently ousted Iraq’s Saddam Hussein). Its regime survival does not depend on a nuclear deterrent. In contrast, the DPRK regime feels incredibly vulnerable to the USA and its Asian allies and absolutely believes that nuclear weapon is its only means of survival.

A better analogy for American policymakers is Pakistan, another historically poor, authoritarian country who believes nuclear weapons are necessary protection against more powerful neighbors (notably India). In fact, India’s 1971 military intervention in Pakistan’s civil war (which helped Pakistan’s eastern state become an independent Bangladesh) spurred Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to start its nuclear weapons program as a matter of national survival. Washington has yet to finalize a deal to satisfactorily contain Islamabad’s nuclear and missile program from potential proliferation or theft.<sup>17</sup> Still, the USA maintains trade and diplomatic dialogue with Pakistan, which has contributed to its stability and an expanding middle class.<sup>18</sup> Growing the middle classes of Pakistan and its neighbor India are ultimately the most effective path to moderate each country’s politics and to limit the risks of military adventurism, state failure and terrorism. Likewise, we advise the Trump administration to engage in targeted or “smart” sanctions<sup>19</sup> that would contain DPRK nuclear and missiles programs, but not the socioeconomic aspirations of its emerging, entrepreneurial middle class.

## Talking with DPRK Refugees and American NGOs

As the Trump administration reviews its policy options it would benefit from credible, first-hand information about what is actually happening inside the DPRK. The administration should be cautious about the testimonies of “celebrity defectors” who receive financial incentives to depict the DPRK regime in a negative, sensational manner (e.g., dumping Christian prisoners in hot iron liquid<sup>20</sup>). More credible and objective testimonials come from ordinary North Korean refugees, most of whom left DPRK for better economic opportunities, not political dissent, and from foreigners who have worked extensively in the DPRK.

American NGOs are among the most active contributors to the peaceful development of North Korea. They have witnessed tremendous changes in the past two decades and expect even more in the future, culminating with the peaceful unification of North and South Korea. They should share their experiences with their fellow Americans and assist the Trump administration to exercise prudent judgment on behalf of the people of North Korea. 

- 1 <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/asia/100000004994935/tillerson-the-policy-of-strategic-patience-has-ended.html>; <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-sanctions-idUSKBN16R2QH>
- 2 <https://www.brookings.edu/research/dealing-with-a-nuclear-armed-north-korea/>
- 3 [http://ifes.kyungnam.ac.kr/eng/FRM/FRM\\_0101V.aspx?code=-FRM150224\\_0001](http://ifes.kyungnam.ac.kr/eng/FRM/FRM_0101V.aspx?code=-FRM150224_0001)
- 4 <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/world/asia/north-korea-china-mobile-phones.html>
- 5 <http://www.reah.org>
- 6 [http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/journal/21\\_4/es-says/003.html](http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/journal/21_4/es-says/003.html)
- 7 <https://pust.co>
- 8 <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20131123000059>
- 9 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25945931>
- 10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnBuzVOaMIw>
- 11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmCpTzA6SKc>
- 12 <https://www.easternvision.hk/2016/11/14/6-types-foreigners-will-meet-north-korea>
- 13 [https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/5131502/RWP11-035\\_Norris.pdf](https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/5131502/RWP11-035_Norris.pdf); <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2009-03-01/how-development-leads-democracy>
- 14 <http://www.socio-legal.sjtu.edu.cn/Uploads/Papers/2011/ROP110512013600373.pdf>
- 15 [https://serendip.brynmawr.edu/oneworld/system/files/annurevpsych\\_49.1.65-2.pdf](https://serendip.brynmawr.edu/oneworld/system/files/annurevpsych_49.1.65-2.pdf)
- 16 <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/09/201291194236970294.html>
- 17 <http://thediplomat.com/2017/02/the-dangers-of-pakistans-tactical-nuclear-weapons>; <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/us-sanctions-7-pakistani-entities-over-missile-programme/articleshow/56269406.cms>
- 18 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/pakistans-middle-class-soars-as-stability-returns-1485945001>
- 19 <http://thediplomat.com/2015/05/making-smart-sanctions-smarter>; <http://www.danieldrezner.com/research/smartsanctions.pdf>
- 20 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/13/why-do-north-korean-defector-testimonies-so-often-fall-apart>

*An early version of this article appeared in The Diplomat (12 April 2017). Reprinted with permission from the Diplomat Media Inc.*



« Kim Jong-un is belatedly recognizing and legalizing the people's de facto transition to a market economy, a process already started during his father Kim Jong-il's regime. »

