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Human Rights in North Korea and the U.S. Strategy of Linkage

By John Feffer

Though it would be difficult to find anyone in the United States who would praise North Korea for its dismal human rights record, this consensus by no means extends to practical foreign policy. In other words, there is broad agreement on what is wrong in North Korea, from the political labor camps to the lack of basic freedoms of speech and assembly, but little agreement on what to do about it or who should be doing it.

At the governmental level, policymakers are divided on whether to link the human rights issue to other pressing concerns such as the nuclear crisis or humanitarian aid. In Congress, an effort is under way to build on existing legislation and embed the human rights movement in a grand "regime change" strategy targeting the world's remaining dictatorships, but financial considerations and traditional balance-of-power calculations may derail this initiative. In the world of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), an evangelical movement has clothed its primary concern for religious freedom in the garb of universal human rights and has gained much political capital, thanks to vocal church support and a faith-based climate of opinion. But mainstream human rights organizations -- as well as mainstream religious organizations such as the National Council of Churches -- remain wary of the missionary zeal and hard-line strategies of these evangelicals.

Divergent strategic approaches might suggest a diversity of policy alternatives on the issue of North Korean human rights, but the discussion taking place in the United States is rather narrow. Indeed, one of the grave defects of U.S. policy on this issue, from the governmental level to the NGO level, has been its myopia. Given the human rights record of the Bush administration and its predilection for using the human rights records of other countries as a justification for regime change, it may well be impossible for the United States to devise a more nuanced and effective human rights policy toward North Korea. It should be possible, however, to learn from both the strengths and limitations of the approaches of other international actors.

The Question of Linkage

The neoconservatives shaping U.S. foreign policy do not trace their origins simply to the "rise of the Vulcans" in the 1990s. [1] Neoconservative thought emerged in the 1970s as a reaction to the drift in the Republican Party toward détente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with communist China. Several Democrats, chief among them Rep. Henry "Scoop" Jackson from Washington State, criticized this apparent reduction in vigilance toward the "communist threat." Jackson joined forces with fellow Democrat Charles Vanik of Ohio to sponsor a piece of legislation that linked the granting of most-favored-nation status in trade to the human rights record of nonmarket countries, especially the Soviet Union, most notably regarding its policies restricting the emigration of Soviet Jews.

This legislation, the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the 1974 Trade Reform Act, was the best known of several neoconservative efforts to undermine the economic engagement and arms control negotiations that characterized U.S.-Soviet détente. [2] Since the legislation resulted in an immediate decline in levels of emigration for Soviet Jews, it would appear to have failed. But its larger goal was to slow the momentum of détente, and in this realm it was successful. The budding neoconservative movement, relatively liberal on domestic issues but hawkish on foreign policy questions, quickly built upon the larger victory of linkage. The Committee on the Present Danger, revitalized in 1976, drove the stake through the heart of détente by trumpeting the Soviet threat and emphasizing the U.S.S.R.'s poor human rights record. Between Scoop Jackson's protégés (Richard Perle, Elliott Abrams, Douglas Feith) and hawkish liberals on the Committee on the Present Danger (Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Paul Wolfowitz), the Cold War Democrats who morphed into neoconservatives played a key role in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and, 20 years later, the election of George W. Bush.

The deep suspicion that neoconservatives have traditionally harbored toward détente—or "engagement" in today's lingo—explains much about current U.S. policy toward North Korea. The mistrust of arms control treaties with the Soviet Union in the 1970s finds its parallel in the rejection of the 1994 Agreed Framework, which froze North Korea's nuclear capabilities In exchange for economic and political Incentives that U.S. hardliners were ultimately reluctant to provide. The belief that expanded trade relations would strengthen the Soviet Union -- and the fear that such trade has empowered China -- translates today into a similar reluctance to engage North Korea economically. And the use of human rights as a wedge issue to undermine détente is echoed these days in comparable attempts—in the United States, Japan, and South Korea—to link engagement policies with human rights improvements.

Neoconservatives, however, are not the only force within the Bush administration, and linkage is only one tradition from which current policymakers draw inspiration. Career diplomats in the State Department, currently working hard to negotiate away North Korea 's nuclear program, are concerned that ineffectual language on human rights might jeopardize any potential agreement. "We have no interest in weaponizing human rights," chief U.S. negotiator Christopher Hill remarked recently.[3] Careful to find a compromise between the pragmatic center and neoconservative hard-liners, Hill has kept the human rights issue visible without explicitly linking human rights violations to the nuclear negotiations. He has argued, simply, that North Korea won't be able to join the international community without addressing these violations.

The debate within the Bush administration over linkage will likely heat up if the nuclear negotiations gain any traction. Since the Six-Party Talks can founder over a wide range of issues—the nature of the economic-security trade-off, the issue of sequence, the matter of a civilian nuclear program—those who are opposed to any agreement with North Korea need not play the human rights card so early in the game. After all, it was comparatively late in the détente era that Henry Jackson and the emerging neoconservative movement pushed for linkage. If negotiators come close to signing a substantive pact far meatier than the September 19 agreement on general principles, the calls for linkage will likely grow louder.

It is also not yet clear what role the special envoy for human rights Jay Lefkowitz will play. In early September, when he hinted that humanitarian aid should be linked to human rights considerations, senior Bush administration figures quickly moved to assure the press that U.S. policy had not changed and that such linkage would not be made.[4] Lefkowitz's remarks were no doubt influenced by a recent report on food and human rights issued by the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea. Written by Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, the report argues that "it is misguided to separate the humanitarian and human rights discourses" and

recommends that food aid be linked to a larger project of political change within North Korea.[5] With North Korea demanding a shift from multilateral food aid to multilateral development assistance -- and the removal of the trump card of pure humanitarianism -- these calls for linkage will become more politically palatable. Together with Vice President Dick Cheney's office, Lefkowitz will likely emerge as a key administration proponent of linkage, but whether he champions this approach at the Six-Party Talks or pursues his work on a parallel track remains to be seen.

Congressional Strategies

After the 1994 Agreed Framework temporarily alleviated the security crisis by freezing North Korea's nuclear program, Congress failed to move on to the other outstanding issues in U.S.-North Korean relations, namely advancing diplomatic and economic ties. Instead of fulfilling the terms of the Agreed Framework, legislators remained fixated on the security question. Opposition to the 1994 agreement focused on the continuing military threat posed by Pyongyang. Just as opponents of détente with the Soviet Union exaggerated the Soviet military threat in the 1970s, critics of the Agreed Framework attempted to show that the threat from North Korea had not diminished after 1994. Their efforts produced the 1998 Rumsfeld Commission on ballistic missile threats—which imagined a North Korean strike against the territorial United States—and the reports and hearings of the hard-line North Korea Advisory Group (NKAG).[6]

In 2000, those previously opposed to the Clinton administration policy on North Korea, such as Donald Rumsfeld and Richard Armitage, moved into the State Department and the Pentagon. When the Bush administration effectively abandoned the negotiating premises of the Agreed Framework as well as the joint U.S.-North Korean statement of October 2000—which pledged to reduce mutual hostilities and take further steps toward diplomatic normalization—the Republican-controlled Congress dropped its previous focus on security. Instead, it took up the human rights issue, first in the North Korea Freedom Act and then by passing the North Korean Human Rights Act in 2004. Thus, after the 1994 pact, while the Clinton administration was looking at nonsecurity issues, Congress focused on security, but after 2000, when security issues became something of an embarrassment for the Bush administration, Congress shifted to nonsecurity issues.[7] Legislators might have participated meaningfully in the security debate after the 2002 crisis broke by signaling that funds would be available for dismantling North Korea's nuclear program and identifying energy alternatives for the country, but Congress failed to act.

In 2005, new congressional legislation placed regime change in North Korea in a much larger context. The ADVANCE Democracy Act of 2005, which has garnered the co-sponsorship of prominent liberals (Barack Obama in the Senate, Patrick Kennedy in the House), has an ambitious goal: to bring down the world's remaining 45 or so dictatorships by 2025. The bill specifies nonviolent means, namely the promotion of democracy and human rights, to achieve regime change. It echoes President Bush's 2005 State of the Union speech calling for the United States to "stand with the allies of freedom to support democratic movements in the Middle East and beyond, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."[8]

Specifically, the bill elevates democracy promotion throughout the chain of command in the State Department. It would establish at the top a new Office of Democratic Movements and Transitions, require the State Department to issue an annual democracy report, and set up an advisory board to evaluate all democracy-promotion activities and spending. It proposes to turn U.S. embassies into "islands of freedom" and align U.S. diplomats with pro-democracy movements in nondemocratic countries. It would even link performance pay and promotions of Foreign Service officers to their efforts in spreading democracy. Initially funded at $250 million for two years, the act would direct resources to pro-democracy movements worldwide. And it would authorize the president to block financial flows to states that resist democratization.[9]

This congressional effort to enshrine regime change in the very mission of the State Department—and replace the more conventional goal of advancing U.S. interests through balance-of-power alliances—essentially makes linkage into an official policy of the United States. No longer will human rights simply be linked to a trade treaty or an arms reduction pact. This legislation would condition U.S. relations across the spectrum of issues with every single country in the world. In terms of North Korea, the bill would make normalization of relations and improved economic ties more difficult if not impossible, and would give the president power to further isolate Pyongyang economically if it doesn't alter its internal political structures. Engagement would be held hostage to "democracy," a term subject to considerable interpretation nowadays.

Although the ADVANCE Democracy Act is likely to pass, Congress has not necessarily subscribed to this broad interpretation, particularly as it relates to North Korea. Even some Republicans support the pragmatic recommendation, first articulated in the Perry Report in 1999, to deal with North Korea as it is, not as one might like it to be. The Heritage Foundation spoke for many Republicans and traditional conservative organizations when it supported democracy promotion but also, pragmatically, cautioned lawmakers to take into account "U.S. vital interests" and not to constrain the executive branch's capacity to shape foreign policy.[10]

The NGO Approach

Mainstream human rights organizations have long had difficulty deciding how to approach North Korea. Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch grew out of a tradition of promoting solidarity between those in "free" countries and those living under authoritarian rule. Without any means of establishing connections with dissidents or political prisoners within North Korea, both organizations initially did not know how to fit that troubled country into their established framework of action. Human Rights Watch co-produced a report on North Korea in the 1980s that, because of the difficulty of verifying the information, did not quite live up to the group's exacting standards.[11] Amnesty International has been reluctant to publish reports without verifiable information, though in the 1990s it began to issue documents on public executions and the treatment of North Korean refugees.[12]

It took a new organization, the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, to produce the first in-depth study. Authored by David Hawk, a former head of Amnesty International USA, The Hidden Gulag: Exposing North Korea's Prison Camps drew on extensive interviews with refugees and defectors to give details on the size, conditions, and purposes of the political labor camp system.[13] With thousands of defectors now living in South Korea, Hawk was able to do the crosschecking and verification that had previously been so difficult. As such, his report had more credibility than the 1988 Human Rights Watch report and goes a long way toward separating truth from exaggeration in the testimonies of defectors. The report's recommendations are generally circumspect: North Korea should abide by the recommendations made by various UN human rights bodies In other words, North Korea should be treated as a country like all other countries and not an Illegitimate state to be brought down. Although the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea has quite a few hard-liners on its board—such as Chuck Downs, Nicholas Eberstadt, and Carl Gershman—they share power with moderates such as Morton Abramowitz and Samantha Powers, and the committee is careful not to engage in any political lobbying.

Because the committee focused on nonpartisan activities and since mainstream human rights organizations remained somewhat cautious, the field was open for new and more aggressive NGOs to tackle North Korean human rights issues. These new NGOs fall into two basic categories. The first exemplified by the Defense Forum Foundation stems from a Cold War hawkish tradition. The Defense Forum Foundation worked to bring the "regime change" perspective of North Korean defectors like Hwang Jeong Yop to Capitol Hill. The second group, which includes evangelical organizations such as the Christian Coalition and the Salvation Army, raises the issue of human rights at the grassroots level among U.S. churches.

The Cold War conservatives in the first group have generally linked human rights to questions of military security, while the evangelicals have viewed human rights through the prism of religious freedom. For both groups, the issue of human rights serves as a lever to pry open North Korea and precipitate the demise of the state. But the hawkish NGOs fit regime change into their larger agenda of keeping East Asia—including China—firmly within their conception of America's sphere of influence, while the evangelical NGOs view the current North Korean government as the chief obstacle to religious proselytizing.

An uneasy collaboration between these two forces produced the North Korea Freedom Coalition, which rallied support for the North Korean Human Rights Act. This tenuous alliance also created momentum for the ADVANCE Democracy Act, when Michael Horowitz of the neoconservative Hudson Institute joined forces with the National Coalition for Religious Freedom and Human Rights, a below-the-radar group of evangelicals.[14] These forces are currently building support for the Scoop Jackson National Security and Freedom Act of 2005, which would set limits on U.S. trade with China if Beijing doesn't change its policy of returning refugees to North Korea.

This same coalition is cooperating on a set of three conferences sponsored by Freedom House and financed by the U.S. government. At the first gathering in Washington, DC, in July, neoconservatives and evangelicals dominated the agenda, marginalizing mainstream human rights groups. Key voices from the 1970s debates against détente clearly articulated their regime change perspective. Former Soviet dissident and Israeli cabinet minister Natan Sharansky echoed the words of Vice President Cheney when he declared at the conference, "You confront evil, you do not negotiate with it."[15] Relatively moderate voices at the conference, such as Rep. Jim Leach (R-IA), were effectively drowned out. At the second conference In Seoul In December 2005, far-right South Korean organizations effectively kept their mainstream counterparts in the human rights movement off the agenda. Christian evangelism, meanwhile, has worked Its way into the very warp and weave of the movement, as could be seen both at the Seoul conference and in the exhibits and presentations devoted to North Korean human rights at Rock the Desert, a Christian music festival held in August 2005 in Midland, Texas.[16]

Nuancing the issue of North Korean human rights still further, a fourth category of NGOs has emerged. Representatives of humanitarian organizations, former government officials critical of Bush administration policy, and assorted academics, while acknowledging the extent of North Korea 's human rights abuses, have argued for a rigorous delinking of the issue from the current negotiations over the nuclear problem. Such groups include Mercy Corps, Friends Committee on National Legislation, and the Alliance of Scholars Concerned about Korea.

Policy Alternatives

The policy debate in the United States, and particularly in Washington, has largely focused on whether to link human rights to the current nuclear impasse—either in a genuine effort to improve human rights in North Korea or to force regime change—or to delink the two and proceed with dispatch to settle the nuclear question. The narrowness of this agenda is partly a legacy of the 1970s, when a similar question influenced the fate of U.S.-Soviet détente. This mindset stems in part from the demands of policymaking in Washington, which boils down to amendments to legislation and ways to affect the appropriations process. It also derives from the hard-line NGO coalition of neoconservatives and evangelicals for whom the strategy of linkage offers a perfect convergence of interests.

The human rights debate should not be reduced to this either-or approach to linkage. Other approaches exist, though they also carry with them potential pitfalls.

Expand the Definition of Human Rights: There are two human rights traditions enshrined in international accords—the political and civil definition and the economic and social definition. The political and civil tradition emphasizes individual rights and freedoms; the economic and social tradition focuses on the welfare of groups and the allocation of public goods. North Korea has emphasized the latter definition when articulating "our-style human rights." In addition to criticizing the United States for its international policies, North Korea has charged the United States with failing to meet the economic and social needs of its population. According to an editorial from the Korean Central News Agency In Pyongyang, "Now so many people of the United States are jobless and destitute and cannot enjoy medical care for lack of money. According to recent data available, 38.2 million people are suffering from hunger."[17] Implicit in this criticism is the argument that North Korea, with free public health care, high literacy levels, and guaranteed jobs for all, does better in these public realms than does the United States.

North Korea might have been able to tout its human rights record as regards economic and social welfare in the 1960s. Today it still does well compared to Haiti or Bangladesh, but North Korea has never wanted to be compared to poor countries. Compared to the West, or even to its neighbor China, North Korea currently performs poorly on all social and economic indicators.

Some humanitarian organizations argue that providing food aid to North Korea is more important human rights work than campaigning for greater political freedoms. They contend that in cases in which massive starvation looms, the right to food trumps other rights and that Western human rights are a luxury that North Korea can ill afford at this time. There is some merit to this approach, particularly given that, unlike South Africa under apartheid, there is no civic movement within North Korea calling on the population to endure economic hardship to obtain political freedoms.

It would be a grave mistake to link humanitarian aid to human rights improvements—and thus risk exacerbating the suffering of the very people that need the most help—but it is also a mistake not to see how the two human rights traditions go hand in hand. The United States, in refusing to see poverty alleviation as a human rights issue, is making the same mistake that North Korea does when it doesn't connect its current food crisis to political and civil rights. Whether Amartya Sen's overall argument that famines don't occur in democracies is correct or not, North Korea's food crisis would have been less severe if the majority of the population had been able to communicate its interests and concerns in a more transparent manner, if there had been greater freedom of movement, and if a legal framework had been in place for assessing competing claims to scarce resources.[18]

The Basket Approach: When human rights finally made it onto the intergovernmental agenda in the détente era, negotiators at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) devised the "three-basket" approach for handling security questions, economic and cultural exchanges, and the "human dimension." Progress along one track was not dependent on progress along any of the other two. In this way, human rights could be part of the discussions but not contingent on any other issue. Human rights was thus bundled with, but not linked to, security and economic cooperation.

At the time, U.S. hardliners dismissed this "bundling" approach as ineffectual or, worse, as appeasement, particularly in comparison with the linkage efforts of neoconservatives like Scoop Jackson. Today, U.S. hardliners have a tendency to conflate the two traditions and praise the very Helsinki process that they and their predecessors excoriated.

The bundled but delinked approach seems well suited to the North Korean situation. European countries essentially handled their North Korea policy in this fashion in the 1990s, establishing diplomatic relations with Pyongyang and pursuing various forms of economic and cultural cooperation, thereby positioning themselves to initiate a dialogue on human rights. This approach initially

held promise, as Pyongyang agreed to discuss human rights, even Individual cases, with European representatives. However, when the European Union initiated a UN Human Rights Commission resolution in 2003 censuring North Korea for such human rights abuses as torture and public executions, North Korea called off its human rights dialogue with Europe. Precisely because the human rights discussion was delinked—not connected to any incentives like economic investment or discussions that might lead to such incentives— North Korea could break off dialogue without fear of losing anything.

Another drawback to the basket approach is that North Korea is well aware of events in the 1970s. New civil society groups in the Soviet bloc—Moscow Trust Group, Charter 77, KOR—demanded that their governments be held accountable to the official language on human rights adopted in the final statement of the Helsinki Accords. Activists used this language as a kind of crowbar to widen public space in countries without free presses or the freedom for groups to assemble. This opening came as a result of perception rather than policy, since the Helsinki Accords did not establish any new human rights law but merely required signatories to abide by the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. So Pyongyang may well be reluctant to sign anything regarding human rights, even if the document doesn't entail additional obligations, simply because it wants to avoid a repeat of what happened in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.

Quiet Diplomacy: Several governments have worked hard to provide North Korean government officials with training on human rights issues. This work is done very quietly with no public fanfare. In Asia generally, the group HuRights Osaka has created opportunities for government officials from Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar (though not yet North Korea, at least publicly) to meet and discuss human rights issues in a nonthreatening environment. By encouraging a change in attitudes and policies over the long term, this low-key work offers a complementary alternative to the "name and shame" activities of mainstream human rights organizations and many governments. The advocates of quiet diplomacy hope that as new technocrats take over from traditional revolutionary leaders, those who have had a chance to mingle with their internationally-minded counterparts from other countries will adopt reform programs to bring the human rights records of their nations more in line with international standards.
Quiet diplomacy can only succeed, however, away from the media spotlight. Once contacts within a closed system are exposed as reformers, they risk isolation, loss of influence, or worse. Viewed as interference, quiet diplomacy collapses. But as long as the media doesn't cover such initiatives, hard-liners can argue that quiet diplomacy either doesn't exist or is ineffectual and that only tactics of escalating pressure are viable. Paradoxically, the most effective on-the-ground engagement cannot be used to bolster arguments for on-the-ground engagement more generally.

Economic Engagement: Central to the gradualist approach to Korean reunification is the notion that economic engagement would encourage political and social change within North Korea. According to this reasoning, which derives in part from the Chinese experience after the country's 1979 reforms, economic engagement would strengthen reformers within the North Korean government, empower a budding array of entrepreneurs, produce a new middle class, and eventually stimulate some form of civil society that would demand greater representation. Even the North Korean military would buy into the reform process by setting up its own companies, and interaction with international financial institutions would force transparency upon North Korean financial (and political) institutions. Indeed, recent engagement has thus far produced modest Chinese-like reforms in North Korea culminating in the country's 2002 economic reforms.

However, there are several challenges to this approach. China was able to take several decades to experiment with its economic reforms, and it did so largely outside the neoliberal demands of international institutions like the World Trade Organization. China was also starting from an economic position considerably less constrained than North Korea 's with its malnourished population. Moreover, the Chinese market offered foreign investors the enticement of over 1 billion potential consumers (compared to North Korea 's mere 23 million). And China 's economic engagement took place during the Cold War, when the United States subordinated human rights in China to the larger goal of balancing the power of the Soviet Union. In addition to the drawbacks of its small and weakened population, North Korea doesn't have the time, the space independent of neoliberal international institutions, or the maneuvering room accorded by the realpolitik considerations of geopolitics that China enjoyed.

Moreover, North Korea has cast a suspicious eye on reform-oriented outsiders for bearing the "poisoned carrot" of economic incentives. Members of the North Korean elite are not interested in presiding over Soviet-style economic reforms that erode their political legitimacy and lead to governmental collapse. How can Korean powerbrokers distinguish between market reforms that preserve political leadership, as in China, from those that undermine that leadership, as in the Soviet Union? And would the economic reforms promoted by outsiders, when finally realized, unleash not economic prosperity but the kind of "shock therapy" that destabilized governments throughout the former Soviet bloc?

Conclusion: What Works?

The perils of linkage include disrupting current negotiations over the nuclear issue and threatening the overall engagement strategy —much as linkage unraveled U.S.-Soviet détente in the 1970s. The focus on whether to link or not to link has also obscured other approaches to human rights questions connected to North Korea, though these blueprints are not without their own drawbacks. North Korea might view the basket approach as a soft regime change strategy; quiet diplomatic efforts require patience and a long-term perspective, and the lack of media attention does little to advertise the benefits of this plan; the expanded definition of human rights doesn't paint North Korea in any better colors and neglects the political and civil dimension of the current economic crisis; and economic engagement carries with it the whiff of a "poisoned carrot" and the probability of political crackdowns a la Singapore or China, as the North Korean leadership attempts to restrict reform from expanding beyond the economic sector.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the above defects, these policy alternatives suggest that a heterogeneous approach stands the greatest chance of success—if success is measured by a general improvement in the economic well-being of the population and a reduction in the most egregious human rights violations such as summary executions and political labor camps. South Korea, Japan, Europe, and the United States are always going to view North Korea differently, given their distinctive ethnic and geopolitical lenses of interpretation. It might be appropriate, therefore, that these varied actors take on separate roles: Europe pursuing quiet diplomacy, South Korea engaging the North economically, humanitarian NGOs focusing on food as a human right, and the U.S. government along with mainstream human rights NGOs undertaking "name and shame" activities.

There are, however, two drawbacks to this approach of functional diversity. "Name and shame" activities are a vital component of human rights work, whether applied to North Korea's labor camps or U.S. detention facilities In Iraq and Cuba. But "name and shame" activities, if promoted by a powerful actor like the U.S. government, can overwhelm all the other strategies, making South Korea's engagement policy, for instance, weaker Internationally and more scorned domestically. It Is important, therefore, to strive for some measure of balance among the different strategies. It is also Important to acknowledge that different actors within countries pursue a variety of strategies. In the United States, the State Department has shown some support for the "bundling" approach, while several U.S. NGOs are engaged In quiet diplomacy -- even as key figures In the Bush administration have concentrated on shaming Pyongyang.

The second drawback Is perhaps more fundamental. Not all organizations working on human rights in North Korea share the same goals. During the era of the Helsinki Accords, even the most vocal human rights organizations in the Soviet bloc didn't call for the collapse of their governments. Efforts were directed toward improving human rights within the current systems. Today, however,

several of the more vocal human rights organizations—both neoconservative and evangelical—have the maximalist agenda of erasing North Korea from the map. In the 1970s, neoconservatives devised linkage to undercut détente; today, the linkage problem relates not simply to the viability of engagement but to the very survival of the North Korean state. To the extent that human rights activities are linked to government collapse, they risk creating greater human rights problems than they purport to solve. While these potential problems -- including economic crisis, refugee outflow, violent factional disputes, loose nukes, and even war -- are of obvious concern to the international community, they pose the greatest threat to Koreans themselves. South Korea already faces challenges assimilating several thousands North Korean defectors: tens of thousands would overwhelm the system. The great disparity between the two economies -- much larger than that between East and West Germany in 1989 -- suggests that sudden economic integration would send South Korea into a prolonged crisis. Even collapse without integration would jeopardize the south's economic standing (not to mention the Impact on northeast China, home to thousands of ethnic Koreans). It is no surprise, then, that except for a fringe element, Korean politicians and social movements seek to avoid regime collapse In the North.

If the scenario of functional diversity is to succeed, it must be clearly distinguished from state-elimination agendas. Governments and organizations should commit to an improvement of the political and economic welfare of North Koreans within their existing system, however modified that system might become. Human rights should be viewed as part of the engagement strategy, not contrary to it. Moreover, this engagement approach, which has largely been restricted to North-South relations, must be embedded in a much larger process of integration.

The first step in a diversified game plan involves the Northeast Asian community. China has proposed institutionalizing the Six-Party Talks, which would give the region its first multilateral security forum. A chief virtue of institutionalizing the Six-Party Talks is that North Korea would become a working member of the East Asian community. Ideally, these regional discussions would expand beyond the nuclear issue to include economic cooperation and the human dimension. To be effective, such an approach should adopt an expanded definition of human rights, should avoid any direct references to the civil society experiences of the Helsinki Accords, and should borrow from the experience of quiet diplomacy in offering North Korean government officials access to the same kind of technical assistance in the human rights realm that they've been given in the economic and legal sector. Moreover, at least at first, China can play a key role in articulating a human rights formula that can elicit North Korean cooperation, perhaps under the general rubric of "human security" and in the context of a working group established within the Six-Party Talks. Such a "human security" framework might emphasize social and economic rights and only gradually address political and civil questions. Improving human rights in North Korea to China 's level, while not ideal, is at least a pragmatic goal, and North Korea is certainly more likely on this Issue to listen to the experiences of Chinese leaders than to the advice of American or Japanese officials.

But regional integration is only the first step in harmonizing North Korea's human rights policies with global norms. To meet international standards, North Korea must be ushered further into the international community. Such integration is the most effective path through which economic, political, and social benefits can flow to North Korea. By the same token, for a coercive policy to work with North Korea—from mild censure to more extreme cancellation of programs—the country must have a greater stake in the worldwide family of nations. Pyongyang must perceive that it has something to lose if it doesn't conform to global expectations, and North Korea must be sufficiently in the public eye that its reputation becomes a factor in its calculations.
Both "name and shame" activists and engagement advocates should keep this integration framework in mind when pursuing their very different, but at times complementary, agendas. But they should avoid viewing themselves in simply a good cop, bad cop, carrot, or stick role. North Korea must be seen as a subject and not just an object. Ultimately North Korea itself, either the leadership or the citizenry but Ideally both, must decide how to create a system of rules that protects human rights. Outside actors should think in terms of providing the tools with which North Koreans can erect a human rights infrastructure themselves rather than simply pursuing a "carrot and stick" approach that pushes North Korea like an unthinking mule toward a destination that only a supposedly wiser rider can see.

End Notes

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