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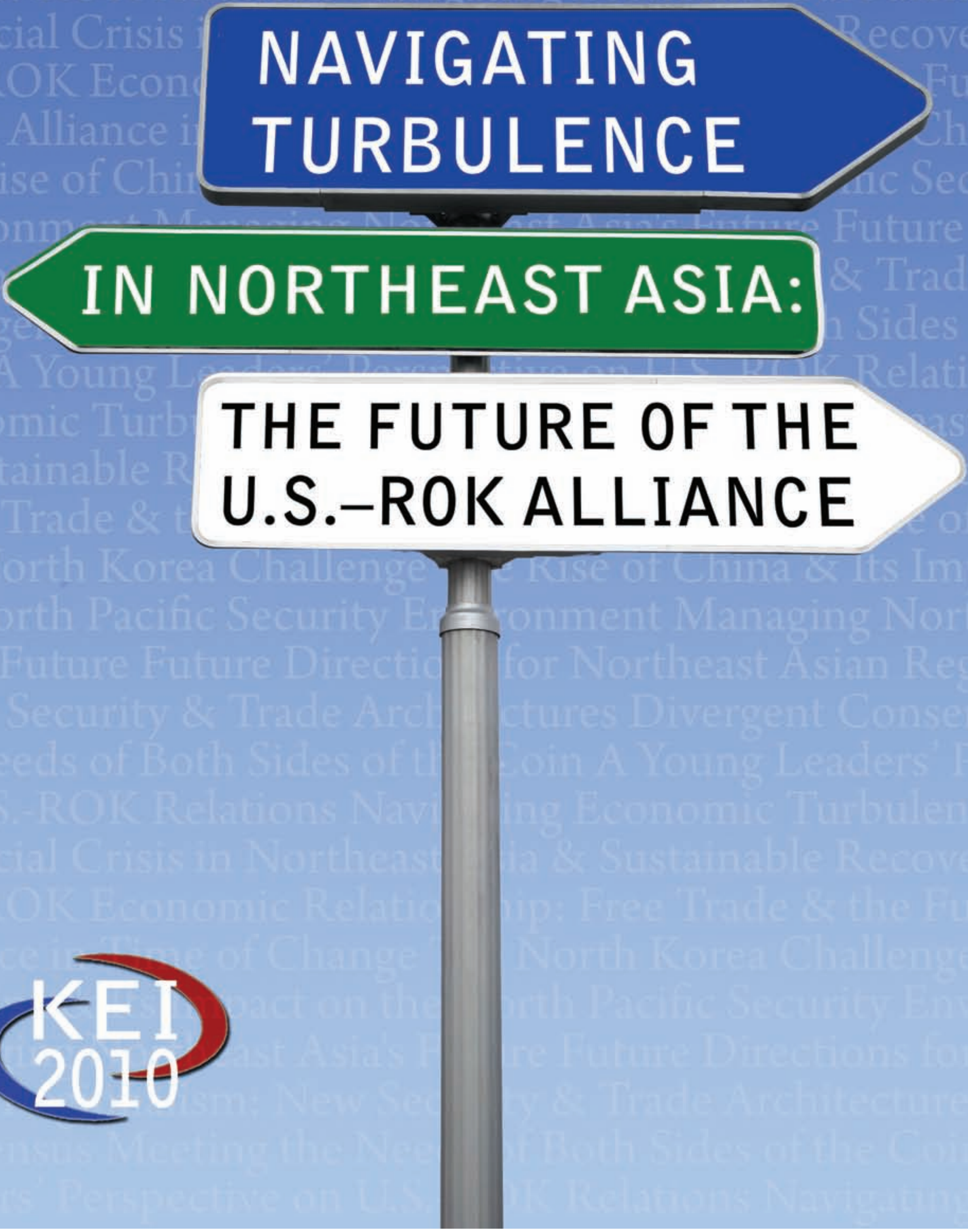

NAVIGATING TURBULENCE IN NORTHEAST ASIA: THE FUTURE OF THE U.S.–ROK ALLIANCE

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CONTENTS

Preface vi

The Financial Crisis in Northeast Asia and Sustainable Recovery

The Financial Crisis in Northeast Asia and Sustainable Recovery
Tom Byrne 1

From Crisis to Recovery: Korea's Policy Response to the Global Financial Meltdown, August 2007–June 2009
Park Yung-chul 17

The U.S.-ROK Economic Relationship: Free Trade and the Future

Whither the KORUS FTA: The Moment of Truth
Choi Byung-il 45

Free Trade Agreements and the Future of U.S.-Korean Trade Relations
Jeffrey J. Schott 59

The North Korea Challenge

The North Korean Issue: What Can Be Done?
Andrei Lankov 77

The North Korea Challenge
David C. Kang 93

The Rise of China and Its Impact on the North Pacific Security Environment

Rising China and North Pacific Security: A Net Assessment
Denny Roy 115

The Rise of China and Its Impact on the North Pacific Security Environment
John S. Park 137

Future Directions for Northeast Asian Regionalism: New Security and Trade Architectures

Future Directions for Northeast Asian Regionalism: New Security and Trade Architectures (. . . with an Emphasis on Security)
James L. Schoff 151

A Political Economy Approach to Northeast Asian Regionalism: From a Crisis Model to a Political Leadership Model?
Park Jehoon. 173

Young Leaders Perspective on U.S.-ROK Relations

Divergent Consensus: Meeting the Needs of Both Sides of the Coin
Jiun Bang, Dae-woo Lee, Kevin Shepard, Adrian Yi 195

NORTH KOREAN ISSUE: WHAT CAN BE DONE?

*Andrei Lankov**

CONTENTS

I. Introduction

II. Soft-Liners' Mistake: Why the North Korean Regime Will Not React to Rewards

III. Hard-Liners' Mistake: Why Sanctions Are Useless

IV. New Situation and New Opportunities

V. Embracing the Tyrants

VI. Helping the Opposition

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I. Introduction

The dramatic events of recent months—and, above all, North Korea’s second nuclear test and long-range missile launch—demonstrated once again that the Barack Obama administration and the international community at large have failed to achieve their goal in dealing with North Korea. This goal has been stated clearly and often: to prevent the emergence of a nuclear-armed North Korea. By now a nuclear North Korea is a hard fact of international life, and no amount of legalistic word play with definitions of what it means to be “nuclear” can change this. To aggravate things even further, it seems that North Korea is also well on its way toward acquiring long-range missile capabilities as well. It is time to realize what the reasons are for this failure and also to think of strategies that might produce a desirable result—a stable, non-nuclear Korean peninsula. In this presentation the author will argue in favor of just such a strategy, a strategy that might be described as “destructive engagement.”

II. Soft-Liners’ Mistake: Why the North Korean Regime Will Not React to Rewards

Throughout the two decades that have passed since the emergence of the North Korean nuclear issue, U.S. strategy has oscillated between two positions.

The soft-liners believe that, if the Pyongyang regime is given sufficient monetary rewards and political concessions, it will ultimately abandon its nuclear ambitions and, perhaps, will even revive its economy through Chinese-style reforms, thus becoming a “normal state.” They insist that Pyongyang should be treated gently, given concessions, and somehow persuaded that emulating Chinese market reforms will serve its own best interests. They also insist that the international community—and especially the United States—should assume the least threatening posture possible when dealing with the Pyongyang regime; this is recommended on the assumption that the North Korean regime will be far more likely to make concessions and, ideally, reform itself if its leaders do not feel themselves threatened. Under the impact of the recent events outlined above, the doves’ numbers shrank considerably, but in general the soft-liners still remain on the sideline and might make a comeback eventually.

Their opponents are hard-liners, firm believers in the power of sanctions and pressure. They assume that only relentless pressure will eventually cause Pyongyang to denuclearize. They believe that economic hardship will make the North Korean leaders reconsider their policies and surrender their nuclear weapons.

The soft-liners dominated the Clinton administration after 1994, along with the Bush administration after 2007. The hard-liners had the upper hand in 2002–06 and, to some extent, in the early 1990s. It seems, however, that these practical tests of the competing positions demonstrated that neither approach is likely to work.

The failure of both lines is closely related to the peculiar structure of the North Korean state and society. For at least four decades, North Korean society has been controlled by a small group of people, numbering a few thousand at most. The majority of these individuals are the children and even grandchildren of former top dignitaries, and they occupy their current positions largely because of their family background. The general populace has very limited opportunities to influence policy and in most cases the (dis)satisfaction of the common people can be safely ignored because it is politically irrelevant. The government would not mind if the living standards of the common people increased, but the well-being (or even survival) of the majority is not particularly high on the government's agenda. In other words, the closest historical analogy to modern-day North Korea is, perhaps, some societies of the ancien régime.

This indifference to popular feeling is completely rational because the North Korean system is designed in such a way as to render 99 percent of the population politically powerless. Needless to say, North Koreans do not vote (or, rather, they vote with a predictable 100 percent approval rating, which has not changed since the late 1950s). The probability of a popular revolution, while not completely impossible (and slowly increasing), is very slim: the 1996–99 famine clearly demonstrated that, even under the most difficult circumstances, North Koreans preferred to die quietly rather than rebel and challenge the regime's security machine.

Unlike many other authoritarian regimes, North Korea does not have much potential for discontent within the elite. Of course, the North Korean elite includes its share of individuals who harbor grand ambition, and it is also full of internal rivalries and hatred. However, the top North Korean leaders are very cautious. They believe—and, as we shall show later, with good reason—that any open confrontation within the top leadership might destabilize the situation and lead to a regime collapse, which would probably be followed by unification. If this happens, all members of the North Korean elite are likely to lose their privileges and power. They therefore prefer not to rock the boat. One cannot rule out the possibility that sooner or later some open clashes will occur, but so far the perceived common threat has made these people cautious and willing to manage their internal tensions.

The powerlessness of the common people and the elite's inclination to put the political survival of the system above everything else make the failure of both hard-line and soft-line approaches virtually inevitable.

The incentives, suggested by the soft-liners, will not work when proffered to such a society. The soft strategy is based on the assumption that the North Korean regime desires development and economic growth. But this is patently not the case. The North Korean leaders would not mind growth, because it would increase their power, but they must take care of more pressing concerns; and they do not need a type of growth that might jeopardize the fragile internal stability of their system. Most governments need growth because it makes people happier (or so politicians believe) and, hence, more supportive of the incumbent government. In North Korea, as we have said, this is not the issue because docility on the part of the populace is ensured by different, less sophisticated, methods. At the same time, long-term economic growth can be achieved only through reform, and that reform is likely to produce unacceptable side effects and hence is to be rejected.

Sometimes the behavior of the North Korean leaders who stubbornly refuse to follow the Chinese path is described as "irrational" or "paranoid." Again, this is not the case. When the North Korean leaders demonstrate their belief that Chinese-style reforms are not an option for them, they are probably correct: the existence of the rich and free South makes their situation completely different from that of China. China can afford openness because a knowledge of the economic success and affluence of, say, Japan or the United States attracts few domestic political consequences. At least, the obviously superior standard of living in the United States does not demonstrate any ineptness on the part of the Chinese Communist Party in running the economy: the United States is clearly a foreign country, with a different history and circumstances. This cannot be the case in Korea, where a hypothetical relaxation of the North Korean regime (and one cannot execute Chinese-style reforms without a considerable relaxation of the present system) would expose the North Koreans to the prosperity of people who speak the same language and are officially considered members of the same nation just meters away across the border. To aggravate the situation even further, the gap in per capita income that exists between the two Koreas is even larger than the gap between China and the United States.

Therefore, partial political liberalization and the spread of information about the outside world and especially about South Korea—two essential ingredients of any proposed Chinese-style reforms—are bound to destabilize the North Korean system. It is an open question whether the resultant crisis could be controlled, but it seems that reforms from above, which are so enthusiastically described as a way to save the regime, are actually likely to lead to an East German–style collapse, not to a Chinese-style economic boom. This fact alone makes the North Korean leaders very skeptical about the monetary incentives suggested by the soft-liners.

Paradoxically, in some cases, especially generous initiatives can be met with a great deal of suspicion. The best example is the much trumpeted “3000 vision,” an ambitious South Korean plan to reward North Korea for denuclearizing by showering it with aid and investment. This plan still constitutes the foundation of Seoul’s official policy line in dealing with North Korea. Unfortunately it is a nonstarter. First, as we will see below, North Korea is not going to sacrifice its nuclear capabilities under any situation. Second, a large influx of foreign—and, in particular, South Korean—investment is not what the North Korean government really wants. Such investment would also bring dangerous information about the outside world. Therefore, the North Korean leaders would prefer aid over investment, assuming that they would have full discretion over distributing or utilizing this aid.

The “optimists” also express the hope that North Korea can be persuaded to surrender its nuclear program if the country is treated with sufficient patience and rewarded adequately. Alas, this is not going to happen either. North Korea has pursued a nuclear program for decades, the program is a long-standing goal of the regime, and it cannot be easily discarded, especially because the surrender of its nuclear weapons is not in the best interests of the ruling clique. The North Korean elite need nuclear weapons as an ultimate deterrent as well as a tool in domestic propaganda, but the major value of their nuclear program is its role as a powerful aid-extraction tool. Without a nuclear program, North Korea would be just another third-rate country, roughly the size and importance of Mozambique, and its ability to attract foreign aid and manipulate the great powers would diminish accordingly. Indeed, the North Korean regime requires a steady influx of foreign aid, which needs to be delivered without too many conditions so that it can be distributed among the faithful and thus used, above all, to strengthen the regime’s control over its population. Unfortunately, no lump-sum payment for denuclearization is likely to be adequate compensation for the ability to squeeze foreign aid from its potential “donors” whenever or wherever it is necessary.

III. Hard-Liners' Mistake: Why Sanctions Are Useless

While the advocates of the soft approach base their logic on dubious assumptions, their hard-line opponents, unfortunately, are unable to propose a realistic initiative because their belief in the power of sanctions and pressure is equally misplaced.

Among some of the more extreme types of pressure, a military invasion is a nonstarter: a war with the North would be winnable, but only at a huge cost and acceptable to the U.S. public only under the most exceptional of circumstances (such as the unlikely proven transfer of fissile material to a terrorist group).

Sanctions are also equally problematic. In fact, no efficient sanctions regime appears possible in relation to North Korea.

A sanctions regime will be effective only if upheld by all major states, and this will not come to pass. China and Russia, driven by their own agendas, might vote for a tough resolution at the UN Security Council, but it is clear that they will not be eager to implement a comprehensive sanctions regime. This reluctance has rational explanations. Neither Moscow nor Beijing is happy about Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, but their major fear is a domestic crisis in North Korea that could destabilize the region. For them, this instability would constitute a greater immediate threat than Pyongyang having nuclear weapons, which they believe are unlikely to ever be used against them. China and Russia have veto power in the UN Security Council and are major trade partners of North Korea, accounting for slightly more than half of Pyongyang's total trade, so they are able to either quietly or openly sabotage any sanctions.

One argument is that the imposition of stringent financial sanctions on foreign banks dealing with the regime would probably deliver a significant blow to Kim Jong-il's coffers. This might be the case, but it is unlikely that financial problems, however grave, would lead to a serious political crisis.

Even in the unlikely event of China and Russia genuinely joining in on sanctions, the efficiency of such a measure remains doubtful. This is related to the peculiarities of North Korea's society, which have been described above.

Normally, international sanctions work in an indirect way. Sanctions do not exercise direct influence on the lifestyle of the elite. It is the common people whose lives become more difficult and challenging if the country is subject to international sanctions. The strategy of economic sanctions is based on the assumption that a dissatisfied population will pressure the regime for a policy change or even regime change. This might take the shape of a popular revolution, while in the case of a more democratic and tolerant regime it might take the form of elections. As we have said, this mechanism is not likely to work in North Korea. If sanctions were successful, therefore, the only result would be the suffering and deaths of common people.

We thus face a paradox: because the North Korean leaders cannot afford change, their regime will have to remain an international threat, using dangerous blackmail as the optimum available survival tactic, while its unlucky subjects continue to endure conditions of poverty and terror. The "North Korean nuclear issue" does not have a solution if seen in isolation; it can be solved only if treated as a part of a much broader "North Korean issue." Because denuclearization is not compatible with the interests of the current system, this system should be changed. This approach seems to be the only long-term solution of the North Korean problem in general and the North Korean nuclear problem in particular.

This is a well-tested approach: essentially, it is how the liberal democracies won the Cold War. While Americans may credit the strategy of containment for cracking the Soviet Union, it was the economic prosperity and political freedoms of the West (as well as the gradual infiltration of information about Western countries' prosperity and freedom) that undermined popular support for the Soviet system. In the case of North Korea, this approach is likely to be even more efficient. First, the income gap between the destitute North and its booming neighbors is much larger than the disparity that existed between the USSR and the developed West. Second, North Koreans will tend to compare their lot with the situation of the South Koreans, whose per capita income is between 17 and 50 times higher but who share a national affinity.

This economic disparity makes the North Korean regime vulnerable. Unlike a majority of the rogue regimes with ideologies based on religious fundamentalism, the North Korean official world view of *juche* has its roots in Marxism and is, essentially, a rationalist ideology. The Pyongyang rulers do not base their legitimacy on an alleged ability to keep subjects spiritually pure and thus better prepared for an existence in an afterlife. Instead, they insist that they rule the country because they know how to make North Koreans affluent in the present world. In reality, the economy and consumption are their most spectacular failures. All communist regimes have been vulnerable to the infiltration of uncensored information from the outside, but the North Korean regime is especially vulnerable because of the exceptional size of the gap in living standards between North Korea and its major rival-competitor. Therefore, the Kim family regime goes to great lengths to perpetuate the ignorance of its populace about life outside the country's borders.

Since the late 1950s, it has been a crime for a North Korean to possess a tunable radio. All radios sold legally have been set to only official channels. In North Korean libraries, all nontechnical foreign publications are placed in special sections that are accessible only to those with a proper security clearance—and no exceptions are made, even for the publications of supposedly "fraternal" countries like China or the USSR. Private trips overseas are exceptional, and official trips are kept to a bare minimum. Needless to say, North Korea is the world's only country without general public Internet access, although it has a small but growing intranet system. To a large extent, these extraordinary measures have worked: until the late 1990s, the average North Korean had only a vague and distorted knowledge of the outside world. Deprived of access to alternative sources of information until the mid-1990s, the North Korean people tended to see themselves as the lucky inhabitants of an affluent and powerful country whose happiness was envied by less-fortunate peoples and nations.

This self-imposed information blockade was combined with daily surveillance that operated at a level far exceeding that of Stalin's Russia. Since the 1960s, any travel beyond one's native county or town has required prior police approval, and overnight visitors need prior registration with the authorities. All North Koreans are required to belong to mutual surveillance groups, known as "people's groups" (*inminban*). A typical group consists of 30 to 50 families living in the same block, and it is headed by an official. The manifold duties of these officials include random household checks, usually conducted around midnight. During such searches, to which every North Korean household is subjected several times a year, the *inminban* head makes sure that nothing improper is taking place (their first object during these searches is to check whether all persons present at a given residence are properly registered). These officials are also expected to know the personal circumstances, family relations, and incomes of all people in their groups.

Thus, soft-liners are correct when they say that fear is the major reason why reform in North Korea is impossible. However, it is not a fear of any hostile foreign environment, which is so frequently cited by the soft-liners. The North Korean leaders know that the major threat they face is internal, not external. They might be uneasy about the likelihood of another U.S. invasion, Iraq style; however, they are far more afraid of their own subjects.

IV. New Situation and New Opportunities

The absence of any concerted reforms does not mean that North Korean society has been unchanging and static. On the contrary, the last 15–20 years has been a time of dramatic transformation, which in most cases has been led by grassroots forces, often acting in complete defiance of the state and its regulations. This spontaneous transformation has made the North Korean regime more vulnerable to domestic dissent and also more open to outside influences. Kim Jong-il's North Korea is not the perfect Stalinist state it was under his father's rule.

The economic collapse of the 1990s delivered a heavy blow to the system of state surveillance and information control. Poorly paid petty officials now enthusiastically solicit bribes. They are very willing to overlook prohibited activities if the reward is sufficiently generous. Travel permits are issued without any questions asked. Border guards look the other way when a smuggler moves merchandise across the border. Even major problems can be solved if the price is right: when a radio set with free tuning is discovered, a bribe of $50–$100 will suffice; getting somebody released from prison camp is much more expensive but is still doable.

Recent experiences have also taught North Koreans that they can survive without relying on the state for all their needs. In 1993–95 the public distribution system collapsed, and North Koreas rediscovered and reinvented the market economy. Estimates vary, but it is clear that most of the income of the average North Korean family is generated by all kinds of activities outside the state economy. People work on small private fields; buy, sell, and exchange all kinds of items; run small illegal workshops (largely producing local imitations of Chinese consumption goods); and engage in smuggling. This lifestyle makes people less dependent on the government and also less eager to follow the official regulations and instructions. Gone are the days when political zeal and the ability to memorize lengthy speeches of the Dear Leader would open the road to promotion. Nowadays, political zeal is rewarded far less than market skills. This means that people are willing to skip indoctrination sessions and are no longer eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the regime. Indeed, many market operators prefer to pay small bribes to their work supervisors, ensuring that they are recorded as present at their official workplaces while, in reality, they are busy making money at the market.

Since the mid-1990s, an estimated half million North Koreans have spent some period of time in China as illegal refugees. The number of North Koreans who are in China at any given moment has varied greatly, peaking at an estimated

200,000–250,000 in 1998. Initially these individuals were refugees who escaped almost certain death in their native villages. Later, they gradually became illegal-labor migrants, attracted by the economic opportunities of the booming Chinese economy. In any event, these people have witnessed the impressive results of the Chinese reforms. Most of them have also heard stories of South Korea's prosperity because they work largely in the borderland areas of China that are inhabited by ethnic Koreans, a community that nowadays has a large South Korean presence. Many of them have watched South Korean television—satellite TV enjoys great popularity among the ethnic Korean population of China. The high quality of smuggled South Korean goods speaks volumes about the economic development of the South.

Last but not least, smuggled radio sets, and especially video and DVD copies of South Korean movies and TV shows, have begun to circulate widely inside North Korea despite government attempts to eradicate this ideologically dangerous trade. Normally, the copies are produced by entrepreneurial Chinese who use satellite TV programs to record shows. It seems that average North Koreans now know (or at least suspect) that South Koreans are doing better than they are—although only a few North Koreans seem to have any clue about the real size of the income gap that divides the two Koreas.

A closer look at North Korea's propaganda demonstrates that even the regime is forced to take into account this change of mood. In recent years, the once ubiquitous stories of the South Koreans' destitution have almost disappeared from North Korea's official media. Instead, North Korean propagandists do their best to rally the people around the flags of nationalism and racism. In recent years, the North Korean official media have presented the North as the embodiment of the true and unadulterated "Korean spirit," so much purer than the sullied South (widespread interracial marriages in the South are cited as proof of shameful miscegenation). It seems, however, that these efforts are doomed to failure in the long run: it is difficult to preach nationalist slogans when the major rival is so successful, speaks the same language, and is indeed recognized by the world as the embodiment of Korean civilization and its success.

In the long run, the disintegration of the surveillance system and the collapse of information isolation are certain to undermine the system, and these trends can be hastened and managed by a set of cheap but persistent policies. It seems the only way to solve the North Korean problem is to change the nature of the regime, and this goal now is moving into the realm of the possible.

V. Embracing the Tyrants

A sound policy toward North Korea should pursue two different (but connected) goals. First, it should promote system change from within (and, of course, by the North Koreans themselves). At the same time, it should cushion the inevitable pain and difficulties this transformation of North Korea's society will create.

The Cold War experience demonstrated how effective cultural exchange can be in introducing illicit knowledge and fostering critical thinking. The citizens of the communist bloc learned of the West's prosperity through various sources. A significant role was played by foreign broadcasts and smuggled dissident literature, but most of the subversive knowledge filtered through the borders thanks to official, government-approved interchanges with the West. The authorities tried to control and manipulate the process but to no avail. For example, the Soviet censors were willing to allow the screening in Soviet theaters of an American movie about trade union activism, but the Soviet audience (including this author, then a teenager) could not fail to notice that the "oppressed" workers of the United States had higher living standards than mid-ranking party apparatchiks in the USSR. Occasional encounters between Western tourists and students became the topic of countless conversations, as did the stories of the selected few who were allowed to visit developed Western countries or even less-controlled "fraternal countries," where knowledge of Western culture and lifestyles could be obtained much more easily. Needless to say, under the influence of this information, Soviet citizens came to conclusions greatly at variance with the official propaganda statements. And there is no reason to believe that these measures, which worked so well in the Soviet case, would be less effective in North Korea.

Controversial trade-offs will be necessary to maintain engagement. A fine example of this is the North-South Kaesong industrial complex. In this industrial ghetto, located just a few kilometers north of the border with South Korea, some 40,000 North Koreans work for approximately 100 South Korean companies and are supervised by South Korean managers. In the United States this project has been criticized as "slave labor," but this description is patently unfair. Yes, the average North Korean worker's real wage is below $30 a month. This is the reason why Kaesong has been criticized as being nothing more than a slave labor camp. Although there is some truth in these accusations, one cannot help but wonder whether critics really think that these Kaesong workers would be better off at an authentic North Korean factory. The average monthly salary in North Korea is just $2, so these jobs at Kaesong are by far the best-paying regular employment for ordinary North Koreans. The Kaesong employees are envied in their neighborhoods, and stories about their good life are now heard as far as the border with China, at virtually the other end of the country.

Any constructive engagement with the North will undoubtedly be criticized by hard-liners as “appeasement” of the regime, but this critique misses the point. Although compromises may be unpalatable at times, the major effect of exchange with North Korea will be the gradual weakening of the government’s physical and ideological grasp over the population. In other words, engagement is necessary, but its goals should remain realistic. Negotiations should not be seen as a way to redeem North Korean leaders, persuading them to abandon nuclear weapons, launch reforms, and become enlightened autocrats. A miraculous transformation of this nature is not going to happen. The major goal of engagement should be the spread of knowledge about the modern world, and the major targets of these programs should be the common people and lower strata of the elite, individuals without a vested interest in perpetuating the inefficiency and brutality of the present system.

Academic and student exchanges are of great importance because they can bring a large number of young, educated North Koreans into contact with the outside world. While away from police surveillance (and close to Internet-equipped computers), North Korean members of the intelligentsia will find ways to learn much about how the world really works. Because the North Korean government is reluctant to send students to the United States, it makes sense for the United States to encourage—and even financially support—such programs promoted by third countries like Australia, New Zealand, or Poland.

In this regard, it is edifying to recall a story from the relatively recent past. In 1958, an academic-exchange agreement was signed between the Soviet Union and the United States. Back then the diehard enemies of the Soviet system were not exactly happy about this step, which they insisted was yet another sign of shameful appeasement and would merely provide the Soviets with another opportunity to send spies to steal U.S. secrets. Alternatively, the skeptics insisted, the Soviets would send diehard ideologues who would use their U.S. experience as a tool in the propaganda war. And, the critics continued, this would be done at the American taxpayers’ expense.

The first group of exchange students was small, and it included, as the skeptics feared, the very people they wished not to welcome on U.S. soil. Just four Soviet students were selected by Moscow to enter Columbia University for one year of study in 1958. One of them, as we now know, was a promising KGB operative whose job was indeed to spy on the Americans. He was good at his job and later established a brilliant career in Soviet foreign intelligence. One of his fellow exchange students was a young but promising veteran of the then-still-recent World War II. After his studies in the United States, he moved to the Communist Party central bureaucracy where, within a decade, he became the first deputy head of the propaganda department—in essence, second in command among the Soviet professional ideologues.

The skeptics appeared to have been proven right—until the 1980s, that is. The KGB operative's name was Oleg Kalugin, and he was to become the first KGB officer to openly challenge the organization from within. His fellow student, Alexandr Yakovlev, a Communist Party Central Committee secretary, became the closest associate of Mikhail Gorbachev and made a remarkable contribution to the collapse of the communist regime in Moscow (some people even insist that it was Yakovlev rather than Gorbachev himself who could be described as the real architect of perestroika).

Eventually, both men said it was their experiences in the United States that changed the way they saw the world, even if they were prudent enough to keep their mouths shut and say what they were expected to say. Thus, two of the four carefully selected Soviet students of 1958 eventually became the top leaders of perestroika.

There is no reason to believe that similar exchanges would produce a different outcome in North Korea. If anything, North Koreans are even more vulnerable because their major "reference group" is the South, formerly the poorer section of their country. Hence, there is a need to encourage maximum contact between North Koreans and the outside world. Most actions that bring foreigners into North Korea and take North Koreans abroad should be welcomed.

Of course, North Korea's leaders are no fools. They understand that such exchanges are dangerous, and they do not want future Korean Yakovlevs and Kalugins to emerge. Back in 1959–60 they even decided to recall their students from the Soviet Union and other countries of the communist bloc and did not send their young people to study anywhere but Mao Zedong's China until the late 1970s.

Despite its many reservations, however, the regime understands that without exchange it cannot acquire the necessary expertise. Indeed, if the topic of study appears innocuous enough, and if the North Korean authorities remain in control of the students' selection, they might take risks. Another important factor is the individual self-interest of elite members. There is no doubt that almost all students who will be selected to go overseas will be the scions of the Pyongyang aristocracy, the hereditary elite. A high-level official could guess that sending a young North Korean overseas would be potentially dangerous. But if the person in question is his nephew or niece, he will probably choose to ignore the ideological threats. After all, a modern education will be very conducive to a successful career even under the current regime, and the more calculating North Korean dignitaries might even be thinking about the fates of their families in a post-Kim future.

Scholarships for North Korean students are not the only form of academic exchange. North Korean scientists and scholars should be invited to Western universities, and books and digital materials should be donated to major North Korean libraries in large volumes. Of course, only selected people with special clearances are allowed to read nontechnical Western publications in North Korea, but they are exactly the people who will matter when things start moving.

VI. Helping the Opposition

Engagement and cooperation make up just one method of undermining the regime's control by introducing dangerous knowledge to North Koreans. While engaging the regime, one should not forget that in the long run the regime is doomed, so adequate attention must be paid to interaction with other forces (or to even creating such forces whenever practical). Apart from engagement and officially approved exchanges, there are other ways to reach the common North Koreans, and those ways should be employed whenever possible.

The most reliable means of disseminating information is through radio broadcasts. It is only a modest overstatement to say that Eastern European communism was brought down by short-wave radio, which delivered to the citizens of the Eastern bloc a regular serving of the subversive truth. In recent years, tunable radios are being smuggled into North Korea in growing quantities, and the politically active minority listen to them eagerly. The United States, Japan, and South Korea should collaborate to create more programs and more radio stations that present a variety of viewpoints. Every time a North Korean switches on a smuggled radio, there should be several programs to choose from, sometimes providing contradictory viewpoints but all based on real-world facts.

Unlike the USSR and Eastern Europe, where the short-wave radio played a leading role in the political awakening, changes in North Korean perceptions of the world are now stimulated, above all, by the spread of smuggled videos. DVD players are quite common and increasingly affordable. It makes sense to produce documentaries dealing with sensitive and subversive subjects and unmasking lies and fabrications of North Korea's propaganda that pertain to lifestyles in the South, the rise of the Kim family regime, and the Chinese reforms, among other topics. These documentaries should be tailored to the tastes, interests, and unique Korean language usage of the North Korean audience.

The ongoing digital revolution brings many new opportunities. Not only documentaries and programs but also digitized books and, perhaps, interactive programs can be sent to the North. These materials can be easily and cheaply copied by North Koreans and thus represent a great advance compared with the era of the samizdat, with its circulation of typewritten copies of prohibited books among the Soviet intelligentsia. In the Soviet Union of my youth, one required several days of persistent work on a typewriter and carbon paper to make five copies of Solzhenitsyn's novel (and everybody knew that five copies was a maximum, that the sixth copy would be illegible!). Nowadays, the same job can be done in seconds if a digital copy is available. It is possible to put entire libraries within the reach of North Korean intellectuals, opening them up to a world of once forbidden knowledge. The necessary technological environment is developing: in spite of a U.S.-imposed ban on selling Pentium-class personal computers to North Korea, more affluent North Koreans are buying used computers from China such that the machines are becoming a status symbol in the country (actually, if this ban is lifted, it will help a great deal: the more computers inside North Korea, the better).

Another line of work is encouraging and even creating an alternative North Korean elite. Because of many factors, including the exceptionally harsh information control and police surveillance in the North, North Korea—unlike most countries of Eastern Europe or the USSR—has failed to develop a social milieu of dissenting intellectuals and sympathizers. The emergence of such an elite would serve to foment the undermining of the Kim dictatorship and play a major role in managing the inevitable transition to a market economy. Therefore, education programs and support for defector groups are of great significance. First of all, people who largely stay connected with North Korea these days (via mobiles and brokers' networks) will be able to exercise considerable influence on North Korea's society and steer it toward transformation. Second, these people will be in great demand when the transformation begins, especially in the likely event that it will take the shape of unification. The post-Kim North Korea will need a good supply of administrators, engineers, managers, and scholars. Otherwise, North Korea may find itself under the complete control of opportunistic North Korean ex-bureaucrats and South Korean carpetbaggers.

So far, the candidate members of this alternative elite can be found in the growing community of North Korean defectors in the South—there are 17,000 of them, with some 3,000 arriving every year. Unlike in communist Eastern Europe, intellectuals are rare among these defectors, most being farmers from the impoverished borderland provinces. Nonetheless, their ranks contain some young intellectuals and a few established academics whose potential should be encouraged. The younger generation should be provided with scholarships and internships, allowing them to complete postgraduate studies (postgraduate studies and English language education are of special importance because an advanced degree and good command of English are two essential requirements for any aspiring Korean professional). Meanwhile, older intellectuals need outlets for their creative and social activities, such as periodicals, radio stations, and publishing houses. Unfortunately, these activities cannot be self-sustaining: South Korean society is remarkably indifferent to the plight of refugees, so the market for such publications is quite small. Thus, some outside help is necessary. In terms of money, this will not cost much, but the efficacy of such programs is remarkable.

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This combination of engagement, information dissemination, and support for émigré communities is the only available way to promote change in North Korea. It is not a quick solution, but the experience of dealing with North Korea has clearly demonstrated that no quick solution to the North Korean nuclear program is available. After all, the problem has been around for two decades, and neither the soft nor the hard approach has brought any success—in fact, the situation has actually deteriorated. Therefore, it is time to realize that only persistent, systematic, low-profile work will help to solve the North Korean problem. The above-mentioned approach has been tried and was successful against much tougher adversaries and in far more complicated circumstances. It makes perfect sense to use that tested strategy again.

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