

Changing North Korea

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An information campaign can beat the regime.

NORTH KOREA, a small country with no economic potential to speak of, has for two decades been a major irritant to the international community. Its nuclear weapons program puts the international non-proliferation regime at risk and threatens to provide assorted rogue states and terrorist groups with the nuclear technology they have long sought. In April, Pyongyang conducted a missile test, and a nuclear test followed in May. In July, however, Kim Jong Il signaled a readiness to talk by inviting former U.S. President Bill Clinton to visit Pyongyang and retrieve two American journalists detained in North Korea since March. Still, this dramatic event was no indication that North Korea is planning to give up its nuclear program.

In considering the North Korean nuclear question, U.S. policymakers and experts typically fall into two camps. The optimists believe that negotiating with Pyongyang will set North Korea on the path of Chinese-style political and economic reforms, help it become a "normal state," and convince it to abandon its nuclear ambitions. The pessimists insist that only relentless pressure will cause Pyongyang to denuclearize. The optimists (such as Christopher Hill, who once led U.S. negotiations with North Korea and is now ambassador to Iraq) favor talks and compromise. The pessimists (such as John Bolton, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations) prefer coercive sanctions. Pyongyang's recent provocations seem to confirm the pessimists' view for now, but at other times the optimists have seemed vindicated, and the pendulum has swung back and forth frequently over the years. In any event, neither camp's approach is likely to work.

The optimists' position rests on two false hopes: that Pyongyang, like Beijing in the late 1970s, might oversee a process of economic reform and that, with patience and goodwill, the international community can convince it to abandon its nuclear program. But Kim and his entourage believe that Chinese-style reforms are not a viable option--and they are probably correct. Market reforms in North Korea would require relaxing domestic surveillance and would spread information about South Korea's prosperity. Because North Koreans would be exposed to the much higher standard of living enjoyed by their neighbors, a kindred people who speak the same language, they would start to question Pyongyang's legitimacy. So major reforms would more likely push North Korea the way of East Germany in the 1980s--namely, toward collapse--than the way of China's economic boom. It is neither paranoid nor irrational, then, for Pyongyang to resist change and maintain its Stalinist institutions and policies.

Because the economic system it strives to preserve is inherently inefficient, Pyongyang is dependent on aid from the outside world. But in order to retain his lock on power, Kim prefers that aid to come with as few conditions as possible--hence, his nuclear and missile programs, which make North Korea an international threat that great powers seek to mollify with billions in aid.

Pyongyang cannot do away with these programs. That would mean losing both a powerful military deterrent and a time-tested tool of extortion. It would also relegate North Korea to being a third-rate country, on a par with Mozambique or Uganda. This is the reason that Pyongyang has rejected South Korea's "Vision 3000" plan, which proposed raising North Korea's per capita GDP (currently estimated at between \$500 and \$1,700) to \$3,000 through a generous aid and investment program--on the condition that Pyongyang denuclearize.

That condition--along with the various connections to the South that such investment would inevitably create--seemed to Pyongyang more threatening than enabling. For 15 years, North Korea's leaders have deftly stuck to a single strategy: start negotiations, squeeze aid out of

the international community by making incremental concessions (while trying to cheat), and then walk away from the talks and stage a provocation or two--only to return in exchange for more payoffs.

The pessimists correctly recognize this pattern, but they, too, hold an unrealistic belief: that external coercion can be effective. The idea of a military invasion is a nonstarter except perhaps in the very unlikely event that North Korea is shown to have transferred fissile material to terrorists. Sanctions, meanwhile, can be effective only if they are supported and enforced by all major states--especially China and Russia, with which North Korea conducts slightly more than half of its external trade. This is not going to happen, however, if only because Beijing and Moscow are far more worried about North Korea's potential instability than its acquisition of nuclear weapons. The Chinese and the Russians do not believe that Pyongyang would attack them. To them, North Korea's nuclear program is merely an indirect threat. To be sure, the approach of Chinese and Russian diplomats might elicit anger from their more concerned U.S. and Japanese counterparts. But this seems to them far less troublesome than the prospect of a North Korean collapse, which would send refugees, arms, and perhaps even fissile material into neighboring states.

Notwithstanding China and Russia, some have argued for shrinking Kim's coffers by imposing financial sanctions on foreign banks that do business with his regime. But even severe financial pressure would be unlikely to create serious political stress. A shortage of luxury goods would not lead North Korean elites to challenge Kim, for they understand that to generate any instability is to risk toppling the whole system and therefore losing their own status and comforts. Such elites would be willing to accept a less luxurious lifestyle for a while. The main victims of financial sanctions would be ordinary North Koreans, whose suffering has not hurt the regime historically. Even after three to five percent of the population starved to death in the late 1990s, there were no signs of political unrest. Terrified and isolated, the North Koreans did not rebel; they died quietly.

When it comes to dealing with North Korea, in other words, the United States and its allies have no efficient methods of coercion at their disposal. The regime is remarkably immune to outside pressure. Its leaders cannot afford change, so they will make sure their state continues to be an international threat, using nuclear blackmail as a survival tactic while their unlucky subjects endure more poverty and terror. The North Korean nuclear issue cannot be resolved in isolation; it is a part of the broader North Korean issue. And that can only be resolved with a radical transformation of the regime. Since outside pressure is ineffective, change will have to come from the North Koreans themselves. The United States and its allies can best help them by exposing them to the very attractive alternatives to their current way of life.

Kim's weakening information monopoly

This is a well-tested approach: it is, essentially, the one that allowed liberal democracies to win the Cold War. Americans sometimes credit containment with cracking the Soviet Union, but it was the West's economic prosperity and political freedom that irrevocably undermined popular support for communism. This approach might be even more efficient in the case of North Korea.

The income gap between North Korea and South Korea is much larger than the disparity that existed between the Soviet Union and the developed West in the 1960s or 1970s. Whereas North Korea's per capita income is estimated (generously) to be between \$500 and \$1,700, South Korea's is about \$20,000. This disparity makes Pyongyang especially vulnerable because the regime bases its legitimacy not on religious grounds, as do some rogue states, but on its

ability to ensure the material well-being of its subjects.

Long aware of this vulnerability, North Korean leaders have taken information control to extremes unprecedented even among communist dictatorships. Since the late 1950s, it has been a crime for a North Korean to possess a tunable radio, and all radios sold legally are set only to official broadcasts. In libraries, all nontechnical foreign publications, such as novels and books on politics and history, are placed in special sections accessible only to users with proper security clearance. Private trips overseas are exceptional, even for government officials.

North Korea is the world's only country without Internet access for the general public (although there is a small, growing intranet system maintained by the government). These measures seek to ensure that the public believes the official portrayal of North Korea as an island of happiness and prosperity in an ocean of suffering. (South Korea suffers "under the yoke of U.S. domination and subjugation, its sovereignty wantonly violated," reports the official North Korean news agency.) On top of this information blockade are various levels of daily surveillance. Travel beyond one's hometown requires police approval, and overnight visitors need to register with the authorities ahead of time. Changing jobs is possible only by government mandate.

But conditions have slightly improved in recent years, and North Korea is no longer the perfect Stalinist state it was under Kim Jong Il's father, Kim Il Sung, who died in 1994. Since Kim Jong Il took over in the mid-1990s and famine killed approximately two million people, the country has been more vulnerable to domestic dissent and open to outside influences. The devastation and chaos of the famine undermined the state surveillance system. Today, badly paid officials overlook prohibited activities--such as travel, smuggling, or migrant work--in exchange for bribes. There is also a booming black market for all kinds of consumer goods, as state industry became paralyzed in the 1990s following the sudden loss of Soviet economic aid. Today, 70-80 percent of the average North Korean family's income is generated through private economic activities. (The rest is still allocated by the state through elaborate rationing systems.)

Further weakening the regime's monopoly on information in recent years has been the continued influence of South Korea. A tiny but growing proportion of North Koreans have learned of South Korean prosperity thanks to smuggled South Korean consumer goods, including tunable radios and DVDS of movies and television shows. And those North Koreans who have spent time in China as illegal refugees--an estimated 500,000 since the mid-1990s--have both witnessed the impressive results of the Chinese reforms and heard of South Korean prosperity from the ethnic Koreans who populate the Chinese borderlands and from the South Koreans who travel there. Thus, rumors about foreign affluence are spreading, undermining Pyongyang's control over its population. The system is disintegrating from below, albeit slowly.

The power of exchange

Truth is subversive in regimes built on lies and isolation. So to crack Pyongyang's control over information and bring about pressure for change from within, truth and information should be introduced into North Korean society. The U.S. government and its allies can do this through two seemingly contradictory strategies: engagement and subversion.

As the Cold War demonstrated, cultural exchanges can be effective in transferring forbidden knowledge and fostering critical thinking. The citizens of the communist bloc learned of the West's quality of life through various sources, including foreign broadcasts and smuggled dissident literature but also, crucially, from government-approved interactions. For example, when Soviet censors allowed theaters in the late 1970s to screen *White Line Fever*, an American movie about trade union activism, Soviet audiences--including myself, then a

teenager--could not fail to notice that "oppressed" workers in the United States lived better than midranking party apparatchiks in the Soviet Union. Occasional encounters with Western tourists and students became topics of endless conversation. So did the stories of the select few Soviet citizens allowed to visit the West or even "fraternal countries" in the Soviet bloc where knowledge of Western life could be more easily obtained. Thus informed, the Soviet people came to conclusions that varied greatly from the official propaganda. Exchanges of this type would have the same effect on North Koreans today. Indeed, they might be even more powerful because North Koreans' major point of reference is South Korea, once a poorer part of the same country. The U.S. government should therefore spearhead initiatives that bring foreigners to North Korea and take North Koreans abroad.

Academic and student exchanges can bring young members of the North Korean intelligentsia into contact with the outside world. Away from police surveillance (and close to Internet-equipped computers), they would learn much about the true workings of the world. If dozens or hundreds of North Koreans studied subjects such as water treatment, finance, or rice agriculture in, for example, New Zealand, Poland, or Vietnam, they would inevitably be exposed to truthful information about the world. (The United States should be careful, of course, not to expose North Koreans to technology that might be militarily valuable to their regime. Exchanges that teach about agriculture, light industry, foreign languages, economics, and medicine would be the most mutually advantageous.)

It is possible that only the scions of the North Korean elite would be allowed to participate in such programs, since the leadership seeks to benefit itself and its friends. But this would still be worth encouraging, as those involved might develop a more independent mindset and share some of their newly acquired knowledge with the less privileged back home. Because the North Korean government is reluctant to send students to the United States, Washington should encourage--and even provide financial support for--such programs in other countries. As I know from personal experience, however, diplomats in such countries are afraid of angering their U.S. ally by appearing to be soft on North Korea. Hence, a clear sign of approval from Washington is necessary.

Of course, the North Korean regime might be disinclined to support any initiative with subversive potential. But since the immediate-term beneficiaries of such initiatives would be self-interested members, relatives, and clients of the ruling class, they would likely support opportunities for exchange and professional training even if they posed longer-term risks to the system.

The importance of encouraging North Korean rulers to support exchanges is one reason why talks with the regime are important, whether through the six-party structure or not. Although talks will not solve the nuclear issue, they can reduce the likelihood of confrontations and support an environment conducive to exchange and interaction.

Hard-liners in the United States would likely criticize exchanges as a form of "appeasement," but they would be missing the point. Although compromises may be unpalatable at times, exchanges with North Korea would ultimately weaken the regime's physical and ideological grip on the population. Engagement is necessary, but its goals should be realistic. The objective would not be to disarm North Korea's leaders or persuade them to become enlightened autocrats--no such miraculous transformation will happen in the near term. Rather, the goal would be to spread knowledge about the modern world to North Korea's common people and lower-level elites, those without a vested interest in perpetuating the brutality of the current system.

Engagement would require making some controversial tradeoffs. Consider the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a fenced-off industrial compound outside of North Korea's second-largest city, Kaesong, several miles from the border with South Korea, where some 40,000 North Koreans work for South Korean companies, supervised by South Korean managers. This project has been criticized by some in the United States; Jay Lefkowitz, the George W. Bush administration's special envoy on human rights in North Korea, wrote that "there is ample cause for concern about worker exploitation" at Kaesong. But although the jobs there may pay meagerly according to South Korean standards, they are by far the best-paying regular employment in North Korea. And although they provide Kim's regime with some money, they also bring a large number of North Koreans into direct contact with their cousins from the South. As these North Korean workers get to observe the South Koreans' dress and possessions and hear their conversations, they become more likely to realize the dishonesty of Pyongyang's propaganda.

Defectors and digital tools

There are other ways besides open engagement to weaken the North Korean regime through the spread of information. Some were employed with great success during the Cold War, and others have become available only recently, thanks to advances in technology. As during the Cold War, radio broadcasts remain a reliable method of disseminating information. An increasing number of tunable radios are being smuggled into North Korea, and these are being used by the small fraction of North Koreans who, assured of their basic physical sustenance, are able to take an interest in politics. For this small but important minority, the United States should support radio broadcasts that provide news, history, and opinion.

North Koreans' perceptions of the world are shaped perhaps primarily by foreign videos and DVDS smuggled into the country--especially from South Korea--by profit-seeking Chinese merchants. Although often illegal, videos and DVDS are watched widely. It makes sense, then, to support the production of documentaries specifically tailored to the tastes of the North Korean audience. Such documentaries should inform North Koreans about daily social and economic life in South Korea, North Korean contemporary history (known to North Koreans only through distorted official claims), and political matters such as reunification. In addition, lighter videos and DVDS can educate North Koreans about the real world even if their chief purpose is simply to entertain.

Thanks to the digital revolution, digitized videos and books could easily be sent to and circulated among North Koreans. This represents a great advance since the era of samizdat, the Soviet underground's practice of retyping and carbon-copying banned books for secret distribution. It creates an opportunity to do something that was unthinkable during the Cold War: put entire libraries within the reach of North Korean intellectuals and introduce them to a world of knowledge the regime has denied them for decades. The necessary environment is developing: despite a U.S. ban on the sale of Pentium-class personal computers to North Korea, more affluent North Koreans are buying such computers used from China.

Instead of continuing the current harmful restrictions, the United States should encourage the spread of computers inside North Korea. The U.S. ban has failed to advance its ostensible goal--namely, to keep computers from North Korean military engineers and government-employed hackers. Yet the ban has unintentionally inhibited the circulation of digital information among the people. This is a shame, for even without access to the Internet, computers remain a powerful tool of emancipation, thanks to flash drives, DVDS, and the like. The United States should allow--and encourage--cheaper personal computers to be sold or donated to North Korea without much hassle. Such low-market computers--which would not be

of great harm even if they fell into government hands--would help create an environment in which unauthorized information spread faster and more easily.

Broadly, the U.S. government should be cultivating a political opposition and alternative elite that could one day replace the fallen Kim regime. Due to many factors, including information control and police surveillance, those few North Koreans who are politically aware hardly constitute a community of dissenting intellectuals. An increasing number of North Koreans have doubts about the system, but they remain isolated and terrified. Washington should focus, therefore, on aiding the dissident community in South Korea, where some 16,000 North Korean defectors live. Most of them are farmers from impoverished borderland provinces, but there are some young intellectuals and even a few established academics among them. The younger generation could be given internships and scholarships, including for postgraduate studies at South Korean and other universities. This would make them the first generation of modern North Korean professionals. Meanwhile, older defector-intellectuals could be connected to creative circles, periodicals, radio stations, and publishing houses. Centers promoting such connections could operate overseas but would usually be best placed in South Korea--not least because few North Korean defectors speak a language other than Korean.

Washington might have to lead such efforts because South Korean society is remarkably indifferent to the plight of the refugees. Despite regular rhetoric calling for the reunification of the Korean Peninsula, South Koreans and their leaders are ambivalent about prompting reform in the North. South Koreans fear the political risks and financial burdens associated with North Korea's implosion and seem to prefer the status quo while hoping that the North Korean problem will somehow solve itself.

In lieu of quick fixes

Combining engagement, information dissemination, and support for émigrés is the only way to promote change in North Korea. This approach, however, might be a hard sell to most Americans. It is likely to bring about only barely visible, incremental change--at least until the situation reaches a breaking point, which could be many years away. Granting a scholarship to a farmer's son, promoting the concert tour of a North Korean tenor, and donating funds to a small radio station run by defectors are not glamorous diplomatic initiatives. Nor will they yield the sort of demonstrable, quantifiable results sought by bureaucracies that are accountable to the public.

But the American public should recognize that there are no quick fixes to the North Korean problem. For two decades, Washington has searched for those, sometimes by way of concessions to Pyongyang, sometimes by way of threats. Both approaches have failed and--given the goals of the North Korean regime, as well as its hold on power today--would fail again and again. Only low-profile and persistent efforts aimed at promoting change from within will make a difference. North Korea is often described as the last outpost of Cold War politics. So why not seek to change that by using the policies that won the Cold War in the rest of the world?

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