Policy Forum 07-052: On North Korea, Hippocrates Not Hypocrisy

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By Katharine H.S. Moon

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I. Introduction

Katharine H.S. Moon, Associate Fellow at the Asia Society and professor in political science at Wellesley College, writes, "The central principle in any policy should be 'do no harm' to those who are already abused. Regime change could worsen human rights conditions ... By working with institutions that specialize in various aspects of human rights and welfare, we broaden the

international constituency around North Korean human rights. We convey to the North Korean regime that it is not being singled out for demonization, and we show the North Korean people that human rights, theirs included, are of universal concern."

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II. Article by Katharine H.S. Moon

- "On North Korea, Hippocrates Not Hypocrisy"
By Katharine H.S. Moon

Two weeks ago, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, the U.S. lead in the six-party talks, went to Pyongyang for a sudden and highly secret meeting with North Korean officials. But even if we get closer to breaking the impasse over the North's nuclear possessions and ambitions, the problem of North Korean human rights will loom large as the world continues to learn about the starvation, lack of political and religious freedoms, mass imprisonment, executions, infanticide and other horrors occurring in North Korea.

The lack of access to information about human rights problems is one obstacle. Another is the multifaceted nature of the problems and the diversity of human rights actors, claims and political agendas. Many governments and NGOs want a piece of the North Korean human rights pie, but agreement is lacking on specific goals and means to achieve them. In 2002, President George W. Bush marked Kim Jong Il's regime as evil, the Congress passed the North Korean Human Rights Act in 2004, and the State Department's first special envoy on this matter, Jay Lefkowitz, was appointed in 2005. But the circle of awareness and debate has remained limited, with political and religious conservatives yelling the loudest about how the U.S. should counter the abuses in North Korea -- to no effect in that country, as Mr. Lefkowitz admitted before Congress in March.

U.S. approaches have been ineffective because goals other than improving North Korean lives have been promoted. The 2004 Act, its more hostile predecessor, the North Korea Freedom Act of 2003, and the Bush administration's hawkish stance toward Pyongyang generated the view that human rights was just a foil for regime change. Some members of Congress also used the North Korean human rights issue not as an end in itself, but as a way to attack China on human rights. China adopted the UN convention and protocol on refugees but has failed to consistently abide by them by intermittently repatriating North Korean border-crossers to face harsh punishment or death. So, criticism is understandable, but it adds to cynicism that North Korea is really a means to get at China and sends conflicting messages to Beijing, whose help is needed on Pyongyang's nuclear and human rights problems. Moderate Republican Congressman James Leach of Iowa felt compelled to caution his crusading colleagues - who had threatened to boycott the 2008 Beijing Olympics on account of China's human rights problems -- that "it would be a massive mistake to come out against the Olympic Games in China." He also reminded them that the human rights issues needed to be balanced with "other issues of profound national security consequences to the United States."

This tension is at the heart of linkage politics -- the insistence by many conservatives and evangelicals in the United States (with partners in Japan and South Korea) to tie human rights closely to the progress of the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear program. But the U.S. is preaching to the wrong choir. Given the political parameters of the six-party talks, progress on human rights is not possible: China and Russia face their own problems on human rights and have no interest in pursuing a human rights agenda with the United States or North Korea; South Korea has gone out of its way to keep the human rights issue off the inter-Korean radar as part of its

engagement strategy. That leaves Japan as the only country willing to back the U.S., but Japan is badly positioned to have credibility or clout on the issue of human rights in Asia, given its inability to face up to its wartime violations. And its human rights agenda regarding North Korea is too narrow to be compatible with that of the United States.

Japan's exclusive obsession with the abductee issue -- insisting that North Korea account for information on and return the Japanese citizens whom Pyongyang had allegedly and/or admittedly kidnapped around thirty years ago -- also has made its participation in the human rights politics seem self-serving. Human Rights Watch issued this rebuke: "Japanese officials rarely mention the gross and chronic human rights violations committed daily against 23 million North Koreans". This stunning silence suggests that Japanese politicians care more about playing on popular anti-North Korean sentiment than they do about constructively helping victims of abuse." With Japan the sole human rights ally among the six-party players, the U.S. would be ineffectual.

The current administration's days are numbered. Those of us who genuinely care about North Korean human rights need to put North Korean lives first. The central principle in any policy should be "do no harm" to those who are already abused. Regime change could worsen human rights conditions, as critics in South Korea, China, Southeast Asia, Europe and the United States have pointed out. Rather than use North Korean human rights as a means to other ends, we should encourage Beijing to live up to its growing international role: cooperative gestures toward the UN and humanitarian organizations, as well as and end to the practice of forced repatriation, would be meaningful ways to gain international respect and trust. We can also appeal to South Koreans' own recent history of fighting for human rights rather than berate them for befriending their Northern kin.

We don't have to go it alone or reinvent the wheel. Existing international institutions and NGOs need to be pushed and supported to address various aspects of North Korean human rights -- e.g., UN Convention on the rights of the child (not to starve or be punished with hard labor or forcibly conscripted into military service), the UN Environmental Program, which has recently collaborated with North Korea, and anti-trafficking organizations. By working with institutions that specialize in various aspects of human rights and welfare, we broaden the international constituency around North Korean human rights. We convey to the North Korean regime that it is not being singled out for demonization, and we show the North Korean people that human rights, theirs included, are of universal concern.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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