



The North Korean Paradox and the Subversive Truth

By Andrei Lankov

North Korea must be transformed from within. Neither sanctions nor direct engagement will work. What is needed is an effort to increase contacts between North Korea and the outside world through cultural and educational exchanges and through economic cooperation that exposes North Koreans to South Koreans and their vastly better way of life. Increased radio and video penetration combined with support for defectors who can aid the transformation when the Kim Jong Il regime ends will also be necessary.

When crafting policy toward North Korea, Westerners tend to follow one of two competing approaches. On one side, some observers—call them optimists—believe that Pyongyang will ultimately revive its economy through Chinese-style reforms. They welcomed the aborted reforms of 2002 with great enthusiasm and think that U.S. hostility has been a major reason why Pyongyang has delayed its long-awaited transformation.¹

Others—call them hard-liners—believe that only increased pressure can bring down the Kim family regime.² They dismiss all attempts at engagement and doubt the efficacy of making concessions in exchange for “reform.” While optimists favor negotiations, hard-liners prefer sanctions. The problem is that neither approach works.

North Korea’s leaders base their right to rule on their alleged ability to provide material affluence for the North’s citizens. This is in reality their most spectacular failure. Thus, the Kim family regime must perpetuate its people’s ignorance about life outside the country’s borders. A Chinese-style political liberalization would certainly create conditions for spreading information about the prosperity in South Korea, and this very information would generate

pressure for change that could ultimately bring about regime collapse.

The North Korean masses are thus watched and terrorized, even at the price of perennial economic failure. North Koreans are not allowed to interact with foreigners, including citizens of supposedly “friendly countries” like China and Russia, in any form without authorization. Tunable radio sets have been banned for decades. Non-technical foreign publications are kept in a special section of libraries, available only for approved readers. And, of course, any true economic or political reform is anathema to the leadership in Pyongyang. The Kim family and its supporters understand that any attempt to improve economic performance will decrease the government’s control over the populace and increase the exposure of the North Korean people to the outside world.

Optimists point to some remarkable changes in North Korea over the last decade, but they must acknowledge that such changes were not “reforms” initiated by the government, but rather gradual loss of regime control over key sectors of economic life. During the mid-1990s famine, North Korea’s Stalinist economy collapsed and was largely replaced by a regionalized black market economy.³ Unlike in China, where the Communist Party leadership initiated liberalization,

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the changes in North Korea occurred in complete defiance of official regulations and in spite of frequent crackdowns.

The North Korean government uses every opportunity to attempt another rollback, trying to restore the iron fist of the 1980s. When, in 2002–2004, the regime came to believe that it had secured access to a moderate but stable flow of foreign aid, it immediately launched a massive crackdown on market-oriented activities that had been tolerated for a decade. For example, in October 2005, Pyongyang outlawed the sale of grain on the market and restarted the Public Distribution System. (The ban has not been enforced due to endemic police corruption.) Soon afterwards, the regime prohibited men of all ages and women under fifty from selling goods in markets. In January 2009, the government stated that all manufactured goods and imported items would be sold at state-run shops rather than street markets.⁴ The message is clear: able-bodied people should go back to where they belong: the factories of the old-style Stalinist economy.

The unlikelihood of economic reform in North Korea is matched by the implausibility of effective sanctions against Pyongyang. Such sanctions are difficult to achieve and maintain, given the divergent interests of North Korea's neighbors. Although China and South Korea are not happy about Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, they fear even more a revolution in the North that could destabilize the region. For Beijing and Seoul, the instability of a revolution, even if it comes in the guise of a relatively peaceful democratic transition, would constitute a greater threat than Pyongyang's nuclear weapons, which they believe are not likely to be used against them.

Furthermore, the North Korean leadership is remarkably invulnerable to sanctions. Sanctions work when the government is vulnerable to pressure, when it can be reelected or overthrown. North Korea's leaders know that if controls are tight, the populace will simply starve to death, but no one will stand up against the regime. The North Korean population has been terrorized for decades, and it does not have even a rudimentary civil society that can become a basis for resistance—no churches, no nongovernmental cultural associations, no civic groups. Hence, in the unlikely case that sanctions are "successful," a few hundred thousand farmers would die, but there would be no major political change.

The overarching problem with existing policy options is that the North Korean leadership will not voluntarily surrender its nuclear weapons, which are an important deterrent. Without these weapons, the regime leadership would feel vulnerable to a foreign attack, and it would not be able to extract sufficient aid from the international community to sustain itself. Since the Kim family cannot afford the political changes necessary to liberalize the North Korean economy, it desperately needs foreign aid. In order to receive it, the family maintains tension and fabricates the crises that it will eventually be paid for solving. This strategy has been employed successfully

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since the 1960s, when the regime learned to manipulate its ostensible allies in Moscow and Beijing. Back then, the North Korean government took advantage of tensions between the Soviet Union and China to extract aid from both Communist powers. The aid came from each essentially as a reward for not joining the other side.

Therefore, we face a paradox: since North Korean leaders cannot change themselves, they will remain an international threat, and their people will continue to live in conditions of poverty and terror. The only solution is the radical

transformation of the dictatorship in Pyongyang. Pressure from the outside, however, is not going to increase the odds of such a transformation, since to date a hostile approach to Pyongyang has strengthened the regime and has increased the suffering of its subjects. Regime transformation is necessary, but it cannot be achieved through traditional methods of coercion.

Engagement and Subversion

In order to crack the regime's control of information and bring about pressure for change from within, the United States and its allies can combine a seemingly contradictory pair of strategies: engagement and subversion. In a regime built upon lies, the truth is the most subversive element, and the challenge today is to introduce the truth into North Korean political life.

The notion of subversive engagement is no contradiction. Indeed, it was central to Western victory in the Cold War. As much credit as Americans may give to the strategy of containment for cracking the Soviet Union, it was the economic prosperity and political freedoms of

the West that truly undermined popular support and doomed the Soviet system. The citizens of the Communist bloc learned of the West's prosperity through various sources. A large role was played by foreign broadcasts and smuggled dissident literature, but subversive knowledge also filtered through the borders due to official, government-approved exchanges with the West. The authorities tried to control and manipulate such exchanges, to no avail. Soviet censors were willing to allow an American movie about trade unions to be shown at Soviet theaters, but the Soviet audience did not fail to notice that the "oppressed" workers of the United States clearly lived better than midranking party apparatchiks. It is not difficult to see that the same strategy could work for North Korea, too.

Of course, North Korean propagandists will do their best to counter this discontent, and they already rally the people around the bloody flags of nationalism and racism. In recent years, official North Korean media have presented the North as an embodiment of the true and unadulterated "Korean spirit"—much purer than the spoiled South. These efforts are doomed to failure in the long run: it is difficult to preach nationalist slogans when one's major rival is much more successful, speaks the same language, and is, indeed, the world-recognized embodiment of Korean civilization.

There is therefore a great need to increase all kinds of contacts between North Koreans and the outside world. Nearly all actions that bring foreigners into North Korea and take North Koreans abroad should be welcomed. These actions will be criticized by hard-liners as "appeasement" of the regime, but this critique misses the point. While compromises may be unpalatable, the major effect of exchanges with North Korea will be the gradual weakening of the government's physical and ideological grasp. Several specific measures are likely to have a significant effect:

Cultural Exchange. Foreigners should be encouraged to teach courses in North Korean universities, foreign orchestras should visit Pyongyang, and North Korean dancers should be invited to present their "revolutionary dances" to Western audiences. In other words, bring the world to the North Koreans (and vice versa). Needless to say, Pyongyang will make sure that only elite families or carefully screened individuals of semi-elite standing will participate in these exchanges, but as the Soviet experience demonstrated, information about the outside world will filter through society.

Educational Exchange. The more often young North Koreans study overseas, the better. Students, being relatively free from the surveillance of the security police, will see a different world, learn new ideas, and acquire skills and knowledge that will be of great use in post-Kim Korea. Since Pyongyang will not be too happy to send even the children of the elite to the United States, more neutral locations, such as Australia and Canada, may be useful for this purpose. U.S. funding for such a program would be especially helpful. Are such programs effective? For the first student exchange between the USSR and the United States in 1958, four Soviet students were selected by Moscow to enter Columbia University for one year of studies. One of them, Oleg Kalugin, was a young KGB operative who went on to become the first KGB officer to challenge the organization openly from within. A fellow exchange student, Alexandr Yakovlev, a Communist Party Central Committee secretary, became the closest associate of Mikhail Gorbachev. (Some insist that it was Yakovlev rather than Gorbachev himself who was 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.⁵

Economic Cooperation. The jointly managed North-South Kaesong Industrial Park has been criticized for "slave labor," but it is extremely useful in the long run. The jobs at Kaesong, meagerly paid by South Korean standards, are by far the best-paying regular jobs in the North, and this fact has become known even in the remote townships near the Chinese border.⁶ Likewise, although Kaesong provides the Kim family regime with money, it also brings an unprecedented number of North Koreans into direct contact with their cousins from the South. As North Korean workers at Kaesong observe the Southerners' dress, possessions, and conversations, they realize that official propaganda is even less honest than they had suspected.

Engagement will only be one part of a successful strategy in dealing with North Korea. The objective of these interactions will not be to turn Kim Jong Il and his henchmen into reformers, let alone democrats. That is a fool's errand. Instead, the goal is gradually to undermine their control over society and encourage pressure from below. Only through an active policy of subversion can one hope to foster the social forces that in due time will be able to challenge and perhaps replace the Kims' clique. There are several key elements of such subversion:

Radio Broadcasts. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that Eastern European Communism was brought down by shortwave radio, which delivered citizens of the Soviet bloc a regular serving of the truth. Radios remain quite uncommon in North Korea, where they are still illegal, but in recent years, their numbers have grown rapidly. The United States, Japan, and South Korea should collaborate to create more programs and more radio stations presenting a variety of viewpoints. Every time a North Korean switches on his smuggled radio, there should be several programs to choose from, all explaining life as it is outside North Korea's state fantasies. Radio stations are especially useful for shaping future North Korean elites, like educators and journalists.

Video Media. DVD distribution will be even more useful than radio broadcasts. While radios are relatively rare in North Korea, DVD players have become surprisingly common in recent years. According to my own interviews with defectors who came from more affluent parts of North Korea, some 25 percent of all households in those areas own players. In fact, South Korean serial programs and television shows enjoy great popularity in the North.⁷ It also makes sense to produce documentaries dealing with sensitive subjects, unmasking the lies and fabrications of North Korean propaganda about lifestyles in the South, the rise of the Kim family regime, and Chinese reforms. These documentaries should be tailored to the tastes, interests, and unique Korean language style of the North Korean audience.

Supporting Defectors. There are some 15,000 North Korean defectors living in South Korea today, with approximately 2,800 people arriving in the last year alone (these numbers increase by 20–30 percent annually).⁸ The majority of these defectors stay in touch with their families in the North using smuggling networks to send money and letters and using Chinese mobile phones to call relatives near the border. Therefore, these defectors have a growing influence on North Korean society. By and large, they are not doing well in the South, where they face discrimination and earn low incomes by Southern standards. There should be more of an effort to help these defectors get a college education, study English, and gain jobs at major South Korean companies. When the Kim regime ends, it will be essential to have a large

number of Koreans with Southern education and acculturation but with Northern roots and connections to build a new, liberated elite in Pyongyang.

The cumulative objectives of these measures—concurrent engagement and subversion—should be to foster in North Korea what the Eastern European thinkers of the 1970s described as the “second society,”⁹ the community of writers, scholars, educators, and journalists who opposed, or at least distanced themselves from, the Communist system and provided a basis for both national identity and elite leadership after the collapse of the eastern bloc's Communist regimes. Similar forces can be brought to bear on North Korea with the help of engagement and subversion. Since the regime is so repressive, these people can be found largely among the ever-growing number of defectors. There is an urgent need to train them, help them to establish themselves, and make them known inside North Korea.

One victim of the Kim regime is the future of North Korea, for the regime's successors, whoever they will be, are not currently being trained to lead North Korea to its liberation.

Thinking Beyond the Kim Family Regime

While the immediate goal of this agenda is to undermine the Kim regime, a more important objective is to begin planning for the post-Kim North. Getting North Korea up to South Korean standards of living will be a decades-long effort, and it is necessary to foster an alternative elite that will be able to replace the present ruling class, which is corrupt, cruel, and incompetent. It is necessary to begin training and supporting these people now to ensure that post-Kim North Korea will have a good supply of administrators, engineers, managers, and scholars. Otherwise, North Korea may find itself under the control of opportunistic Kim-era ex-bureaucrats, puppets of Beijing, or South Korean carpetbaggers.

Due to the existence of a rich and successful South, North Korea's leaders believe that they cannot emulate China without putting their system and themselves in grave danger. Their perception is correct. Unfortunately, they do not pay the price for this strategy: the oppressed masses suffer the most under their rule. The international community, which has become a host to this parasitic regime, is another victim. Yet another victim is the future of North Korea, for the Kim regime's successors, whoever they will be, are not currently being trained to lead North Korea to its liberation.

The only way to transform North Korea is from within. Propped up on a firmament of lies and fabrications, the Kim family regime is uniquely vulnerable to information. One should engage North Korea—but in ways that will change the minds of the North Korean people. A combination of engagement and subversion is not appeasement, but rather a path to bring the subversive truth to the North Korean people.

AEI research assistant Apoorva Shah worked with Mr. Lankov to edit and produce this Asian Outlook.

Notes

1. “North Korea is now in a transitional process shifting from ‘reform within the system’ to ‘reform of the system.’” (Young Chul Chung, “North Korean Reform and Opening: Dual Strategy and ‘Silli [Practical] Socialism,” *Pacific Affairs* 77, no. 2 [Summer 2004].)

2. Among the most active proponents of the hard line is former U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations and current AEI senior fellow John R. Bolton, who has made his position clear in a number of publications available through www.aei.org/bolton.

3. For more details on this remarkable (and often underestimated) transformation, see Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 165–208.

4. Kwang-Tae Kim, “NKorea to Crack Down on Markets to Stem Imports,” Associated Press, January 14, 2009.

5. See Oleg Kalugin, *The First Directorate: My 32 Years in Intelligence and Espionage Against the West* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994); and Alexandr Yakovlev, interview by Harry Kreisler, University of California, Berkeley, November 21, 1996, available at <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/Elberg/Yakovlev/yak-con3.html> (accessed February 20, 2009). It is instructive that hard-line anti-Communist propaganda had a very negative impact on Yakovlev.

6. Author’s interview with “Mr. Han,” a recent defector from Musan, April 2008.

7. Reports about this phenomenon are numerous. See, for example, Yoon Il Geun, “South Korean Dramas Are All the Rage among North Korean People,” *Daily NK*, November 2, 2007.

8. “Over 2,800 N.K. Defectors Arrive in South in 2008,” *Korea Herald* (Seoul), January 5, 2009.

9. Elemer Hankiss. “The ‘Second Society’: Is There an Alternative Social Model Emerging in Contemporary Hungary?” *Social Research* 55, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 1988).