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THE WALTER H. SHORENSTEIN
ASIA-PACIFIC RESEARCH CENTER

**MOVING
FORWARD**

LESSONS FROM NORTH KOREA'S PREVIOUS EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

Kyung-Ae Park

Over the years, North Korea has been considered the most reclusive country in the international community. From the mid-1990s, however, Pyongyang increased its contacts with the outside world, seeking rapprochement with other countries. It normalized diplomatic relations with various countries in the early 2000s, and these diplomatic offensives have resulted in increased numbers of overseas visits by North Koreans.

The present study examines the lessons that can be derived from North Korea's educational, technical, and training programs and exchanges of earlier years, especially those between the mid-1990s and early 2000s. The study is based on a survey of 66 cases, which can represent a large enough sample to suggest patterns and trends in North Korea's exchange programs at the Track Two (non-governmental) level. Analysis of the trends and patterns is focused on illuminating the following issues: In what areas is North Korea interested in pursuing exchanges, training, and dialogue? Who are the players on the North Korean side? Are there any signs of "opening"? What are the objectives and goals that North Korea is trying to achieve through these activities?

Lessons for Future Strategies from Previous Exchanges¹

Several characteristics appear noteworthy regarding the pattern and nature of North Korea's past engagement in exchange and training programs.

1. Why the Fluctuations in Number of Visits?

The number of visits by North Koreans for various Track Two programs has increased over the years. This indicates that North Korea is increasingly linking itself to the international community and making efforts to move away from isolation and toward engagement. However, in many cases, exchange programs experienced a slowdown and programs planned were canceled or delayed. For example, between the end of 1998 and early 1999, many programs organized by the UNDP, World Bank, IMF and other institutions in the United States, Australia, China, and Japan were not implemented as

scheduled.

A series of political defections by North Korean diplomats in 1998 appear partly responsible for the halting of these programs. After the former ambassador to Egypt defected to the United States in August 1997, three more diplomats followed suit in 1998. A third secretary stationed in Italy at the FAO defected in February of that year. In March, a councilor who was in charge of science and technology at the DPRK embassy in Thailand sought political asylum. Finally, a technology attaché at the embassy in Switzerland defected in May. After these incidents, North Korea seemed to have decided to reduce the level of exposure of its people to foreign countries, restricting any long-term stay in other countries, even for training purposes. Given that these defecting diplomats were technocrats, Pyongyang might have decided, in order to prevent any further defections, to dispatch fewer training and exchange delegations, whose members are mostly professionals and technocrats.

Another factor that might have affected North Korea's reluctance is the publicity surrounding these activities. Some of the planned activities such as the World Bank programs were widely publicized and aroused interest among several South Korean organizations wishing to be involved. This could have eroded North Korea's enthusiasm. In addition, if these programs were publicized and covered by press reports, it could give the impression to the outside world that North Korea was pursuing economic reform, since most of these programs are geared toward an understanding of the way a market economy functions. As far as North Korea is concerned, its economic disarray is not due to a fundamental failure of its economic structure, but rather due to the collapse of the world socialist market, American economic sanctions, and natural disasters. North Korea, therefore, actively seeks to avoid any publicity that might suggest that it is making steps toward "economic reform" or system transformation.

In considering the future strategies of exchange programs, we need to bear in mind that a high level of publicity surrounding the programs can be counterproductive and that North Korea will be cautious in order to control the flow of exchanges and contacts when they pose a potential threat to its political system. Considering that Pyongyang's focus is first and foremost regime security, and that the regime perceives contact with the outside world through this lens, exchange and training programs need to be benign in nature and tightly managed so as to eliminate any suggestion of political maneuvering on the part of the host country.

2. Who Are the Sponsor Organizations in North Korea?

North Korean sponsor organizations have become quite diverse, including both governmental and "non-governmental" groups. However, many "non-governmental" groups such as the Korean Association of Social Scientists and the Asia-Pacific Peace Committee often send Ministry of Foreign Affairs

officials under Track Two auspices. Some U.S. and South Korean government officials suspect that several of the unofficial organizations in North Korea are merely front groups of the Foreign Ministry or other government organizations. In addition, virtually every exchange group includes a “coordinator,” whose role is to ensure the group’s activities are consistent with government policies.

More recently, Pyongyang has shown some flexibility in allowing host organizations to select their own counterparts in North Korea. Although we cannot infer from this flexibility that the regime is relaxing its control over exchange programs, it would be a good strategy for the host to identify a specific sponsor organization and clearly indicate its preference for that organization. As Pyongyang gains more experience with exchange and training programs, host organizations will presumably have a greater degree of choice in selecting organizations that they wish to host, thereby facilitating more meaningful and beneficial programs. However, while the degree of choice stands to increase in the future, it is reasonable to expect that North Korean sponsor organizations will continue to be tightly regulated and monitored by the government. Host organizations will continue to have to work within the bounds set by Pyongyang, but with careful program planning and selection of sponsor organizations participating in exchange programs, both parties’ level of satisfaction with the exchange experience should increase.

3. Who Are the North Korean Participants?

North Korean participants have become diversified over the years, including many technocrats and experts. In the past, the common pattern was repeat visits by a relatively small number of individuals—political elites who were allowed to travel abroad and to represent the country. However, for more recent training programs and study tours, experts were chosen as participants, and for many of them, these programs were their first foreign visits. Meanwhile, political figures continue to dominate the delegations for academic exchanges and Track Two dialogues.

As with the case of the sponsoring organizations, requests for participants with specific background or expertise would be a recommended strategy. An exchange composed of experts rather than political figures will presumably result in a more “unfiltered” exchange of knowledge, per se, which has a greater potential to equip our North Korean counterparts with the advanced skills and knowledge needed to address pressing issues in their country.

4. Who Provides Funding for the Visits?

Host organizations funded almost all of the North Korean visits. With the notable exception of visits to the United States, and more recently to Europe, funding agencies are largely international organizations, including the UNDP, the World Bank, the IMF, the IMO, the WHO, the FAO, UNESCO, and

UNCTAD. They sponsored the majority of the training programs. In the United States, funds came mostly from non-profit foundations such as the Asia Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, universities, NGOs and private companies.

Although most of the expenses for North Korean delegations were covered by these organizations, it is notable that in 1999 North Korea began to fund some of its activities on its own. The Potato Study Tour to Hungary in March 1999 was funded by North Korea, and funding for six of the sixteen programs in the latter part of 1999 was also provided by North Koreans. These were all agricultural and medical programs, except for one academic visit, for which North Korea provided part of the funding. This indicates that North Korea has become more aggressive in pursuing training programs, especially in these two areas.

Nevertheless, what is clear for the future strategy of engagement programs is that the host organizations should be ready to bear all expenses for the programs. It is unreasonable to defer plans for engagement programs in the hope that Pyongyang will proactively seek out a program or initiate one at its own cost. Rather, expenses resulting from hosting these programs must be seen as “the cost of doing business” with North Korea.

5. What Are the Substantive Fields of Engagement?

North Korea has been pursuing engagement mainly in substantive and pragmatic fields rather than in the areas where symbolic representation has value. The exchanges are concentrated in five fields: international law and business, agriculture, medicine, energy, and English language. This reflects the fact that North Korea has put priority on restoring its deteriorating economy and public health system, and especially on overcoming severe shortages in hard currency, food, medical supplies, and energy. North Korea has pursued training programs to learn international law and business transactions. This reveals that Pyongyang has realized the necessity of acquiring knowledge in these areas in order to deal effectively with the growing foreign commercial presence in North Korea and with the increasing business transactions with South Korean firms. It also indicates that North Korea has been preparing itself to do more business with capitalist markets in anticipation of the lifting of U.S. economic sanctions.

What this implies for future strategies is that host organizations should identify and focus on the areas in which Pyongyang is in need of engagement. A specialized approach to program planning and offerings is clearly in both the host organization’s and North Korea’s best interests. Moreover, the greater possibility of mutually beneficial exchange and the possibility of continued programs with a wider range of North Korean participants can be reasonably expected if an organization responds to what Pyongyang actually wants.

6. *Who Are the Host Countries?*

First, contacts for training programs and study tours are not limited to socialist or former socialist countries. In order to gain firsthand knowledge, North Korea has diversified its outreach to encompass many capitalist systems in Europe, Asia, North America, and Latin America. North Korea has sent delegations not only to friendly countries but also to countries with which it does not have diplomatic relations.

Second, Japan and South Korea are noticeably excluded from the diversified host groups, largely due to political considerations. In South Korea, during the Sunshine Policy era under the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments, there were several North Korean visits, especially at the governmental level. Nevertheless, North Korea has not been open to dispatching its non-governmental delegations to Seoul for long-term stays for engagement in training programs. Likewise, North Koreans have participated in academic conferences in Japan from time to time, but no major training programs have taken place there.

Political tension and deteriorating bilateral relations can have a huge impact on exchange programs. Clearly, politics dictates progress in these matters; therefore, host institutions should be prepared for unexpected political disruptions. North Korea has consistently displayed a degree of unpredictability in its dealings with foreign countries, and remains ever sensitive to perceived threats to its sovereignty and security. In light of this fact, host institutions should be well advised that carefully laid plans can be dashed with little notice, often due to circumstances well beyond their control. As has always been the case, exchange programs should nonetheless be pursued with patience and flexibility. Patience and deliberateness must be practiced by host countries when pursuing programs.

7. *Sensitiveness of the Social Sciences?*

North Korea tends to prefer training in social sciences in politically friendly countries. While technical training and training for hard sciences in areas such as energy, medicine, and agriculture have been conducted in the United States, programs for social sciences, including finance and business management, have taken place elsewhere. In the 1990s, these programs were mostly held in China, Australia, Thailand, Singapore, Pakistan, Hungary, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, and Sweden. All of them had diplomatic relations with North Korea, and they are characterized by being politically more independent and neutral.

North Korea's tendency to send delegations for social science training to politically friendly countries might be a sign of their intention to minimize the possible influence of "spiritual pollution" and to cope effectively with any politically sensitive incidents such as a political defection. Although the United States has hosted the greatest number of delegations, North Korea

appears very cautious in exposing its social scientists to the United States for long-term training. Even when American institutions have organized and sponsored training programs, they have taken place in other countries.

It remains to be seen whether this pattern will continue if North Korean delegation visits increase substantially in the future. It is entirely possible, however, that there is little room for potentially threatening nations to diversify their exchange programs in light of Pyongyang's rigid worldview. Further, considering the regime's "siege mentality," which has been exacerbated in recent years, it is unlikely that this worldview is bound to change in the current political climate. In the meantime, host organizations in countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Pyongyang might well be advised to focus on non-ideological, technical initiatives.

8. Why Explore Academic Contacts?

North Korean delegates have used their visits, especially academic ones in which the symbolic representational value is greater than the substantive value, as a channel for making political contacts with government officials and policymakers of the host countries. For instance, a North Korean academic delegation to Canada met with Foreign Ministry officials in Ottawa; a delegation to the University of Georgia met with senators, members of the House of Representatives, and journalists in Washington, D.C., after the academic seminar. A delegation that visited New Zealand for a seminar at Victoria University also met with Foreign Ministry officials and exchanged views on ways of normalizing diplomatic relations.

North Korea seems to believe that academic exchanges should eventually lead to the improvement of bilateral relationships, and regards these unofficial visits as the key to official contacts in the future; they can use contacts and relationships established during their unofficial visits when opportunities for official dialogue arrive. As such, exchange and training programs can serve to facilitate meaningful dialogue in many cases, which proves their worth despite the many challenges entailed. When diplomatic channels are limited or non-existent, unofficial opportunities for dialogue must be cultivated. Bearing this in mind, it would be a good strategy to continue to provide academic exchanges, especially in countries with no diplomatic relations with Pyongyang.

North Korean Goals in Exchange Programs and Their Implications for Future Strategies

Whether Pyongyang's exchange programs are signs of deliberate efforts by the Kim Jong-il regime to open up the country is debatable. Some argue that the reform-minded technocrats in North Korea are initiating Track Two contacts as part of a process of moving toward transformation of political, economic, and social systems. In other words, the Western-devised concept

of a “soft landing” by North Korea is beginning to be realized. However, the pattern of North Korean involvement in exchange and contact programs does not support this argument. The pattern reveals, instead, that North Korea’s engagement is not comprehensive but carefully selective. North Korea’s engagement is selectively concentrated in such fields as agriculture, energy, medicine, and business transactions. Why is this so?

As the Chairman of the National Defense Commission and General Secretary, Kim Jong-il is in full control of North Korea. Moreover, the eternal authority of his father backs his leadership. However, as with any other regime, the North Korean regime has to prove itself in order to maintain its legitimacy. The ideological basis of Kim Jong-il’s legitimacy is provided by his status as the executor of the *juche* (self-reliance) idea. However, he will ultimately have to satisfy the people’s basic needs with his leadership performance. His ability to overcome economic difficulties, especially food, energy, and hard currency shortages, is directly linked to his performance-based legitimacy. The necessity for Kim Jong-il to demonstrate leadership through credible performance in these areas drives the current exchange programs and visits. Foreign contacts aimed at gaining more advanced knowledge contribute to enhancing Kim’s legitimacy, and, in the future, can be expected to do the same for the legitimacy of the heir apparent, Kim Jong-un. Thus, exchange programs and visits ultimately work to stabilize North Korea’s ruling system.

Kim’s performance in the economic area, however, is constrained by the inherent dilemma that he faces. On the one hand, he is bound to protect ideological purity to maintain the ideological basis of his legitimacy, which is accomplished most effectively under a tightly closed and controlled system. On the other hand, the economic performance basis of his legitimacy would be enhanced in a more open system. Thus, he presides over a system that has what Larry Diamond calls “generic vulnerability” built into it. Given this inherent constraint, North Korea has to be careful in selecting exchange programs so as to focus only on the programs that can yield economic gains beneficial to the regime’s consolidation.

In North Korea, there are a number of bureaucrats and technocrats who are considered soft-liners. Although they are more open-minded and may be less reluctant to enact economic liberalization, they also have vested interests in the maintenance of the regime, as they rise together or fall together with Kim Jong-il. Their tactical strategy toward the outside world, therefore, is to first prepare a “mosquito net” before they open any windows. They are determined not to let any “mosquitoes” into their system and thus carefully select what might come in through the net. Accordingly, they concentrate exchange programs only in selective areas essential to the regime’s survival. What North Korea is trying to achieve through these contacts is the enhancement of regime legitimacy.

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In this respect, various exchange programs that take place are the result of a rational calculation; these programs promise to bring political and economic gains and should, in turn, help to bolster the legitimacy of the regime. One thing that is clear to Kim Jong-il is that the foremost goal of his regime is to protect his ideological legitimacy. Therefore, he needs to prevent any undesirable side effects brought about by foreign contacts. Uncontrolled opening of the country will be detrimental to the ideological basis of his legitimacy. This suggests that any efforts by the outside world to infiltrate the country with the intention of reforming the society will not be tolerated. North Korea will resist any exchanges and visits that it perceives to be intended for such a purpose.

In sum, it appears that North Korea will continue to expand selected exchange and contacts in the future to enhance the performance basis of legitimacy. However, it will focus on promoting programs that are directed to substantive and issue-specific activities with limited goals and without political ramifications in order to protect the ideological basis of regime legitimacy.

Notes

¹The analysis is drawn from Kyung-Ae Park, "North Korea's Nongovernmental Foreign Contacts," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 12, no. 1 (2000): 33–51.