North Korea and the Subversive Truth

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By all rational measures, North Korea is the model of a "failed state." The country is the poorest in East Asia, with a populace that struggles to survive on an annual income between some $500 and $1,200. Despite this economic catastrophe, the North Korean regime is itself a master survivor, a living fossil whose political system is a vestige of Stalinism. Since the early 1990s, many observers have predicted the regime's imminent collapse, but Pyongyang has consistently outmaneuvered its more powerful adversaries while keeping its starving populace docile. The survival strategy followed by the North Korean regime rests upon a simple but effective imperative: control information at all costs.

Above all, the leadership in Pyongyang understands that the North Korean people must never be exposed to the outside world. If this happens, the North Koreans would discover that their country is not the "people's paradise" and "envy of the world" described in the regime's propaganda. Indeed, if North Korean commoners ever learned about the true prosperity of their South Korean cousins, and if they became less afraid of the government's wrath, they would do what East Germans once did: they would demand unification on South Korean terms, discarding the Pyongyang ruling elite to the proverbial "waste bin of history."

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," in any form without clear authorization. Tunable radio sets have been banned for decades. Non-technical foreign publications are kept in a special section of libraries, rendered 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 reduce the government's control over the populace and increase the exposure of the North Korean people to the outside world.

The North Korean Paradox

When the "North Korean question" is discussed, Western opinion tends to follow one of two competing approaches. Optimists tend to believe that Pyongyang will ultimately revive its economy through Chinese-style reforms. Those people tended to perceive the aborted half-baked reforms of 2002 with great enthusiasm and sometimes perceive US hostility as the major reason Pyongyang is delaying the long-awaited transformation.[1] This belief is more common in South Korea, where the Left has a strong nationalist flavor that makes it unduly positive about Pyongyang's dictators. In contrast, pessimists believe that only increased pressure will eventually bring down the Kim family regime.[2] Hence, optimists favor negotiations and concessions, while pessimists prefer to organize sanctions. The problem is that neither approach will work.

The optimists face a fundamental dilemma: North Korea's leaders are both unwilling and unable to emulate China's reforms. The existence of a prosperous and free South makes the

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[1] For example, Young Chul Chung wrote: "North Korea is now in a transitional process shifting from 'reform within the system' to 'reform of the system.'" See Young Chul Chung. North Korean Reform and Opening: Dual Strategy and 'Silli (Practical) Socialism'. Pacific Affairs. Vancouver: Summer 2004.

2 Among the most active proponents of a hard-line one approach is a former US ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, who has made his position clear in a number of publications.

situation in Korea dramatically different from that of China or Vietnam. If the North Korean people learn how poor they actually are in comparison with their southern neighbors, it will be very difficult for the regime to stay in power. After all, a Chinese-style political liberalization is certain to create conditions for spreading information about South Korean prosperity, and this very information could lead to a collapse of the Kim family regime. Therefore, the North Korea leaders believe that to survive they will have to keep the situation under control and ensure that the populace remains ignorant.

Even as optimists point to the remarkable changes in North Korea over the last decade, they must acknowledge that those changes were not "reforms" initiated by the government but the 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 China, where the Party leadership initiated marketization, these changes in North Korea occurred in complete defiance of official regulations and in spite of frequent crackdowns by the authorities.

The government uses every opportunity to attempt another rollback, trying to restore the social and political situation of the 1980s, which seems to be their ideal. Once the regime came to believe in 2002-2004 that it had secured access to a moderate but stable influx of foreign aid, it immediately launched massive crackdowns on the anti-socialist activities that had been tolerated for a decade.

In October 2005, when Pyongyang stated that the Public Distribution System would be fully re-started, it outlawed the sale of grain on the market. (The ban has not been enforced, thanks to endemic police corruption.) Soon afterwards came regulations prohibiting males from trading at markets. The message was clear: able-bodied people should now go back to where they belong, the factories of the old-style Stalinist economy. There have also been crackdowns on mobiles phones, and border control was stepped up. From December 2007, the authorities ruled, in order to sell goods at the market a woman had to be at least 50 years old. This means that young and middle-aged women are pushed back to government factories. There were also campaigns against private shops, inns and eateries, which had proliferated during the last decade.

This prognosis leaves the pessimists with few grounds upon which to gloat, however, for the unlikelihood of economic reform in North Korea is matched by the implausibility of an effective sanctions regime against Pyongyang. Such sanctions are difficult either to achieve or maintain, given the divergent interests of North Korea's neighbors. While China and South Korea are not happy about Pyongyang's nuclear development and proliferation, they do not want to see revolution in the North that could destabilize the region and thus they will support Pyongyang in the face of such a development. 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 North Korea's nuclear weapons, which they believe are not likely to be used against them.

Even a strong sanctions regime would quite likely be ineffective, as the North Korean leadership is remarkably invulnerable to sanctions—the Kim family regime simply does not care too much about the survival of its populace. A sanction regime usually works when the government is somehow vulnerable to pressure from below and/or within, in other words, when the government in question can be reelected or overthrown. North Korea's leaders

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

know that if controls are tight, the populace will just starve to death, but nobody will dare to stand against the regime. The population has been terrorized for decades and does not have even rudimentary networks that can become the basis of resistance—no churches, no non-political cultural associations of any kind. Hence, even in the unlikely case that sanctions are "successful," the accomplishment will likely mean a few hundred thousand dead farmers, but still no major political change.

The overarching dilemma for each of these policy courses is that the North Korean leadership will not voluntarily surrender its nuclear weapons. Pyongyang's nuclear weapons are important for both deterrence and blackmail. Without nuclear weapons, the Kim family regime leadership will feel vulnerable to a foreign attack, and also will not be able to extract sufficient aid from the international community to sustain itself. Since they cannot afford the political changes necessary to make their economy efficient, the North Korean leaders badly need this foreign aid. In order to receive it, they have to maintain tensions and even fabricate crises, which they are of course paid for resolving.

The North Korean strategy of creating and then resolving crisis is a quite rational one, but creates grave problems for all its neighbors. It means that North Korea cannot be just left alone and ignored. Since the regime cannot revive its economy, it depends greatly on its ability to extract aid from the outside world. Hence, if ignored, it will simply raise the stakes. While always ready to sacrifice a number of its common citizens, North Korea will react to neglect by manufacturing another crisis.

This strategy is not new, actually. It has been employed successfully since the 1960s, when the regime learned to manipulate its so-called allies in Moscow and Beijing. Back then, the North Korean government used the quarrel between the USSR and China to demand aid from both Communist great powers. The aid essentially came as a reward for not joining the other side. In other words, Pyongyang learned to be paid for not doing something that could harm the donor's interest. The first nuclear crisis of the early 1990s was a masterpiece of this strategy: in 1994, Pyongyang began to receive regular payments in exchange for a promise not to develop nuclear weapons.

We therefore face a paradox: since the North Korean leaders cannot change themselves, they will remain an international threat and their people will live in conditions of poverty and terror. Hence, the only solution is the radical transformation of the dictatorship in Pyongyang. However, pressure from the outside is not going to increase chances for such a transformation, as a hostile approach to Pyongyang has invariably made the regime even stronger and increased the suffering of its subjects. Regime transformation is necessary indeed, but it cannot be achieved through such traditional methods of coercion as international sanctions.

Engagement and Subversion

The North Korean paradox is deeply intertwined with the regime's greatest vulnerability, its need to maintain information isolation. North Korea's leaders base their right to rule on their alleged ability to provide material affluence for the citizens, which in reality is their most spectacular failure. Given this contradiction, the Kim family regime must perpetuate the ignorance of its populace about life outside the country's borders. If the population learns about the country's actual poverty, it will generate pressure for change that may ultimately bring about regime transformation.

In order to crack the regime's control of information and bring about this pressure for change from within, the United States and its allies should combine an ostensibly contradictory pair of strategies: engagement and subversion. In a regime built upon lies,

truth is the most subversive element, and the challenge today is how to introduce the truth into North Korean political life.

The notion of subversive engagement is no contradiction. Indeed, it was at the center of the West's victory in the Cold War. As much credit as Americans may give the pressure of containment for cracking the Soviet Union's shell, it was instead the economic prosperity and political freedoms of the West that truly undermined popular support for and thus doomed the Soviet system. The citizens of the communist bloc learned of the prosperity of the Western countries 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, but to no avail: the Soviet censors were willing to allow an American movie about trade union activities to be shown at the Soviet theaters, but the Soviet audience did not fail to notice that the "oppressed" workers of the United States clearly lived better than mid-ranking party apparatchiks. It is difficult to see why the same strategy cannot be applied in North Korea as well.

Of course, North Korean propagandists will do their best to counter this discontent, and already increasingly rally the people around the bloody flags of nationalism and racism. In recent years, North Korean official media have presented the North as an embodiment of the true and unadulterated "Korean spirit," so much purer than the spoiled South. However, 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 the world-recognized embodiment of Korean civilization and its success.

There is thus a great need to increase all types of contacts between North Koreans and outside world. Nearly all actions that bring foreigners inside and North Koreans outside should be welcomed. These actions will be criticized by the pessimistic hard-liners as "appeasement" of the Kim family regime, but this critique misses the point. While compromises may be unpalatable, the major effect of exchanges with North Korea will be a gradual weakening of the grasp the government and official ideology still have over people. Several specific measures are likely to have a significant effect.

> λ *Cultural exchanges*. Foreigners should be encouraged to teach courses in North Korean colleges, foreign orchestras should tour in Pyongyang, and North Korean dancers should be invited to present their revolutionary dances to Western audiences. In other words, everything that brings the world to the North Koreans and/or brings North Koreans to the world is a smart investment. 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 has clearly demonstrated, the information will filter down anyway.
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> λ *Educational exchanges*. The more 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 also acquire skills and knowledge that will be of great use in post-Kim Korea. Since Pyongyang will not want to send even the children of the elite to the United States, more neutral locations such as Australia or Canada may be useful for this purpose. U.S. funding for such a program would be especially helpful.
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> In regard to the efficiency of such programs, one should mention the first student exchange between USSR and USA. In 1958 four Soviet students who were selected by Moscow to enter Columbia University for one year of studies in 1958. One of

them, as we know now, was a young KGB operative, while his fellow student was a young but promising veteran of the then still-recent World War II who soon became second in command among Soviet professional ideologues. The KGB operative's name was Oleg Kalugin, and in the 1980s he was to become the first KGB officer openly to challenge the organization from within. His fellow student, Alexandr Yakovlev, a Communist Party Central Committee secretary, became the closest associate of Mikhail Gorbachev (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. So two of the four carefully selected Soviet students of 1958 eventually became the top leaders of perestroika.

λ *Economic cooperation.* The joint North-South managed Kaesong Industrial Park has been much criticized for the problem of "slave labor," but it is extremely useful in the long run. The jobs in Kaesong, awfully paid by South Korean standards, are still by far the best-paid regular jobs in the North, and this fact has become known even in remote townships near the Chinese border.[4] Likewise, Kaesong Industrial Park provides the Kim family regime with money, but it also brings a hitherto unprecedented number of North Koreans into direct contact with their cousins from the South. As North Korean workers at Kaesong observe the Southerners' dress, personal items, and conversations, they come to realize that the official propaganda is even less honest than they have suspected. Additional projects of this type should be supported.

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, our goal is to undermine their control over society and encourage pressure from below, be it of a gradual or a more immediate nature. Only through an active policy of subversion can one hope to foster the societal forces, which in due time will be able to challenge and perhaps replace the Kim clique. There are several key elements of such subversion:

λ *Radio broadcasts.* It is only a modest overstatement to say that East European communism was brought down by a short-wave radio, which delivered to the citizens of the Eastern Bloc a regular serving of the subversive truth. Radios remain quite uncommon in North Korea, where they are still illegal, but in recent years their numbers have grow 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 or her smuggled radio, there should be several programs to choose from, sometimes providing contradictory viewpoints, but all based upon real world facts. Radio stations are especially useful for communicating with such future North Korean elites as educators and journalists.

λ *Video media.* In the peculiar North Korean situation, the production of DVDs and other digital programs will be even more efficient 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 from the more affluent parts of North Korea, some 25 percent of all households in those areas own players. South Korean serial programs and other television shows enjoy great popularity in

4 The author's interview with Mr. Han, a recent defector from Musan, April 2008.

the North.[5] It makes sense to produce documentaries dealing with sensitive and subversive subjects, unmasking lies and fabrications of the North Korean propaganda that pertain to lifestyles in the South, the rise of the Kim family regime, and Chinese reforms, among other topics. These documentaries should be tailored to the tastes and interests, and unique Korean language usage, of the North Korean audience.

λ *Supporting defectors*. There are some 15,000 North Korean defectors living in South Korea today, with some 3,800 more expected to arrive this year (these numbers increase 20-30% annually). The majority of defectors stay in touch with their families back in the North (they use smuggling networks to send money and letters as well as Chinese mobile phones to call relatives if their home towns are located near the border). Therefore, they have an ever growing influence on North Korean society. By and large, these people are not doing well in the South, where they feel discriminated against and receive very low incomes by Southern standards. There should be ever more effort to help these defectors acquire a college education, study English, and gain entry into major South Korean companies. When the Kim family regime ends, it will be essential to have a relatively large group of educated Koreans with North Korean backgrounds and connections to help establish a new, liberated elite.

The cumulate objective of these measures—of this concurrent engagement and subversion—should be to foster in North Korea what Vaclav Havel once described as the "second society." This was the society 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 following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. The same alternative forces should be created in North Korea. Since the regime is so repressive, such people can be found largely among the defectors whose numbers are growing rapidly. There is an urgent need to train them, to help them to establish themselves, and to make them known inside North Korea.

Thinking Beyond the Kim Family Regime

While the immediate goal of this agenda is to undermine the Kim family regime, its more important objective is to begin planning and preparations for a post-Kim North. Raising North Korea 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 in equal parts corrupt, cruel, and incompetent.

To achieve this, education programs and support for defectors' groups is of great significance. It is necessary to begin training 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 North Korean ex-bureaucrats, Chinese puppet masters, or South Korean carpet-baggers. Such an elite class will not be conducive to a speedy recovery of the country's economy and society.

Due to their peculiar situation, above all, 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 seems to be correct. Unfortunately, they are not the people who pay a dear price for this strategy: it is the underprivileged commoners suffering under their rule. Another victim is the international community, which has become

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5 Reports about this phenomenon are numerous. For a more recent one, see Yoon Il Geun. South Korean Dramas Are All the Rage among North Korean People. DailyNK, 2 November 2007.

host to a parasitic regime that lives by blackmail. The last victim is the regime's ultimate successors, who today are not trained to lead North Korea to its ultimate liberation.

The only way to transform North Korea is from within. Propped upon 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 bring change to the minds of the North Korean people. A combination of engagement and subversion is not at all appeasement; indeed, it will ultimately bring the "subversive truth" to the North Korean people.

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