

Korea Crisis: Threats Do Not Promote Human Rights

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While the international community has widely condemned the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) for its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and proliferation of nuclear weapons, there are clearly differing attitudes about how to resolve the unfolding tensions in the region.

In addition to the dangerous talk of a unilateral military attack, the United States is also working to economically isolate the DPRK. Efforts are made by the United States to prevent the DPRK from purchasing the petroleum needed to operate its agricultural system and to prevent the country from selling its coal on the international markets. Pressure is increasingly put on China to cooperate with U.S. efforts to isolate the country, efforts which essentially consist of taking food from the mouths of Korean families, as retribution for nuclear proliferation.

At the same time as they are engaging in efforts to threaten and economically isolate the DPRK, U.S. leaders continue to invoke the concept of “human rights” in the process. Officials in the U.S. contend that the leaders of the DPRK are “violating the rights” of their people, and that their economic sanctions and military threats are justified because of this.



The USS Michigan nuclear-powered submarine arrives at port of Busan, South Korea, April 25, 2017.

[Photo/Xinhua]

When speaking about human rights in the DPRK, Western leader's words are tainted by obvious hypocrisy. While human rights allegations against the DPRK are based on the

unproven claims of defectors, there is no dispute about the crimes of the U.S.-aligned Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy which beheads, tortures, flogs, and mutilates its citizens routinely. Saudis, both foreign guest workers and citizens, have been executed for crimes like “sorcery” or “insulting the King.” This does not stop the United States from remaining economically and militarily tied to this regime, even as it engages in war crimes against its neighbors in Yemen.

Furthermore, with their actions against the DPRK, U.S. leaders seem to forget that the conditions created by military threats and economic isolation are not conducive to human rights. In all societies it is recognized that the right to free assembly and freedom of speech can and must be put on hold in conditions of war. When facing a foreign foe, societies of all types become more authoritarian and militarized. Placing the DPRK into a situation where it anticipates foreign attacks or invasion is highly unlikely to result in democratic reforms. The same can be said for sabotaging the DPRK’s economy.

If anything, the road to human rights on the Korean Peninsula is not economic isolation, but economic integration. Human history demonstrates that if the level of prosperity and development increases in a country, the level of transparency and civil freedoms increases along with it.

If Western corporations were to reach an understanding with the DPRK, and create joint ventures and free economic zones, the likelihood of imminent war would immediately decrease. Western corporations and the DPRK’s leadership would both have a direct material interest in ensuring peace, so the economic cooperation could continue. If the DPRK were able to see its standard of living rise and military threats decrease, it would be far more open to scaling back the state of war and preparedness that has defined it since the 1950s, and escalated since the 1990s.

Xi Jinping’s leadership of China and the “Belt and Road” policy are based on this fundamental understanding that peace and human rights are linked to economic stability. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the former president of the United States, expressed similar sentiments saying:

“People who are hungry, people who are without jobs, are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.”

As tensions increase on the Korean peninsula and throughout the Pacific, leaders should carefully consider, not how punitive or crushing their actions can be, but rather, what will be their actual results. The peace, human rights, and expanding economic development — the shared goal of all rational human beings — are not being advanced by threats of war or economic isolation of the DPRK.

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