Conclusion: the contentious terrain of North Korean human rights activism

Citation:

This material has been published in North Korean Human Rights: Activists and Networks edited by Danielle Chubb and Andrew Yeo. This version is free to view and download for personal use only. Not for re-distribution, re-sale or use in derivative works.

© 2018, Andrew Yeo and Danielle Chubb

Book is available from Cambridge University Press:
https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/north-korean-human-rights/96258BCC8FBB70571238D5FC37B88AF62

Downloaded from DRO:
http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30113888
Conclusion

The Contentious Terrain of North Korean Human Rights Activism

Andrew Yeo and Danielle Chubb

The chapters collected in this volume provide insights into the ways activists in various contexts have pursued the issue of North Korean human rights. The stories that emerge reveal a contentious terrain, where relations between activists and groups are defined by the different ideas they bring to the table, in terms of how to bring about real change for the North Korean people. The volume, therefore, brings the discursive frames that surround activists and their networks into the spotlight. By identifying and unpacking the ideas – as reflected in discourse – that drive activism, we shed light on the wide variety of debates taking place within the civil society sphere and the larger transnational advocacy network. Taken together, these expositions provide rare insights into the long and often difficult path activists have trodden in their quest to shed light on the human rights abuses taking place inside North Korea, and to advocate for better outcomes. The complex interactions within and between civil society and state actors in the North Korean human rights network have shaped public conceptions of how North Korean human rights are viewed today. We learn, crucially, about why certain rights conceptions have become more dominant than others, as well as points of convergence and divergence within debates over North Korean human rights.

In Chapter 1, we argued that activists’ interpretations of their normative commitments, reflected in their discursive frames, carry consequences for advocacy movements and their subsequent outcomes. In the case of North Korean human rights, the outcomes pursued by activists are diverse and range from bringing about human-rights-compliant behavior in the repressive state to provoking regime change or collapse. As such, the chapters in this volume explore the varieties of discursive frames that activists deploy and the relationship between such discursive frames, transnational mobilization, and human rights advocacy outcomes. This concluding chapter will offer some reflections
on the themes that have emerged in this volume, articulate observations on the value of empirically driven research into transnational activism, and consider the implications of the volume’s findings for scholarship and policy.

ACTORS, IDEAS, AND STRATEGIES IN THE NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS SPHERE

The report from the UN COI on North Korean human rights puts the responsibility for post-COI action squarely in the hands of the DPRK, as well as a broad collection of outside actors including China, South Korea (and the South Korean people), civil society, and the “international community” as a whole. The recommendations put forward by the Commission’s report are wide-ranging, including the referral of North Korean leadership to the ICC, the fostering of inter-Korean dialogue, and the promotion of people-to-people dialogue. Most poignantly, the COI report implored the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to “ensure that the conclusions and recommendations of the Commission do not pass from the active attention of the international community. Where so much suffering has occurred and is still occurring, action is the shared responsibility of the entire international community.”

Our project began with the simple proposition that if we wish to understand the obstacles and opportunities facing the international community as it seeks to act on the report’s various recommendations, we should first look at the evolution of North Korean human rights discourse, at both the domestic and transnational levels. The points of convergence and contention that have characterized discourse and activism in these spaces are reflected in the COI report, and a greater understanding of how state and nonstate actors have navigated this terrain provides a distinct and comprehensive reading of where the international community stands with respect to the North Korean human rights issue.

Three major themes emerge from this volume. First, particular interpretations of human rights dominate the network’s agenda, thus reflecting the values and motivations of the actors involved within it. Second, the chapters reveal the important role that state-based actors have played within advocacy networks across a variety of domestic and regional contexts. Finally, we find that while a strong advocacy network clearly exists (corroborated by the similar patterns and parallels revealed across the chapters), actors within the network have proven themselves remarkably adaptive. The network is simultaneously

---

1 UN Human Rights Council 2014, sect. V.94(f).
cohesive and fractured, and deliberately so. In the paragraphs that follow, we briefly consider each of these themes in turn.

Defining the Discursive Terrain: The Politicization of North Korean Human Rights

Human right advocates in this space have been engaged in long-running conversations about the types of approaches needed to bring about human rights change in North Korea, and which actors are best equipped to bring about such change. Conversations taking place in South Korea, the United States, Japan, and Europe, for example, take on their own distinctive discursive and normative forms, which then feed into the transnational sphere. At the same time, the evolving discursive terrain at the transnational level is reflected back into domestic debates, with actors continually responding to the changing shape of North Korean human rights discourse. A thematic focus of many chapters in this volume has been the question of how actors understand and interpret the North Korean human rights debate.

In South Korea, for example, debates over North Korean human rights have been dominated by conservative voices, as illustrated by Reidhead in Chapter 2. However, in part due to resistance from progressive South Korean lawmakers who were reticent to take a public stand on the North Korean human rights issue out of concern that it would jeopardize inter-Korean engagement opportunities, South Korea’s National Assembly could not pass its own domestic legislation on North Korean human rights. This began to change with the establishment of the COI, which, alongside the growing transnational movement supporting the COI’s findings, helped shift the tenor of human rights discourse in South Korea. Where North Korean human rights were once seen as an issue dominated by radical, anticommunist conservatives, the COI and the international profile and legitimacy the UNHRC provided pushed North Korean human rights into the South Korean conservative mainstream. As Goedde notes in Chapter 7, the COI report increased pressure on the South Korean government to pass a North Korean human rights bill which had been stalled in the National Assembly for more than a decade.

Although the COI report helped push North Korean human rights out of the shadows and placed it on the agenda of the international community, there is no doubt that debate on North Korean human rights – certainly, debate that is audible to the political mainstream – is politicized, and often framed through the lens of an isolationist, political-change paradigm. In South Korea, arguments around economic, social, and cultural rights are
often disconnected from the broader human rights debate and tend to form part of a progressive, rather than conservative, agenda. The evolution of discourse in the United States, while forming a longer trajectory (as explicated by Yeo in Chapter 3) has also seen a great deal of interaction between conservative political forces and the civil society sphere. In the US context, discourse over North Korean human rights was shaped by Cold War–era debates suffused with anticommunist ideology. The conservative paradigm that tends to dominate discourse over North Korean human rights in both South Korea and the US has thus evolved within a broader political context. In Japan, too, discourse around North Korean human rights is linked inextricably with a localized, political agenda. Arrington’s conceptualization of North Korean human rights discourse as “multivalent” highlights the interaction between the emotive abductions issue and the broader human rights narrative that has taken root. In Japan, different networks and organizations have come together and deployed distinctive conceptions of North Korean human rights.

Shifting attention to Europe, Narayan in Chapter 5 suggests that the conversation on North Korean human rights appears more diversified. Narayan points to the idea of “critical engagement” where human rights advocates have worked with states to shape a foreign policy outlook which seeks to maintain a constructive relationship with the North Korean government while at the same time introducing human rights issues into the dialogue. Of course, drawing North Korea into a dialogue about their own human rights situation is at the core of a UN-focused strategy. As Hosaniak demonstrates in Chapter 6, transnational coalitions have used diplomatic tools to introduce ideas of accountability into North Korean human rights discourse and advocacy. In Europe and at the UN, therefore, activists draw on ideas around dialogue and consultation, which coalesces with the EU’s broader foreign policy framework. Here, discursive frames employed by activists are less affected by local political ideologies than they might be in South Korea, the United States, and Japan, and this has proven to have direct consequences for strategies. Rather than seeking to isolate North Korea, activists seek to engage, or to at least place pressure on, the regime within the UN institutional framework.

**Network Composition: The Role of the State**

A second theme, and one closely connected to the above, is the important activist role that state actors play within the broader network. Their role has

---

carried significant implications for the North Korean human rights movement’s discursive and strategic evolution. Reidhead’s observations of the trajectory of human rights discourse in South Korea leads him to the conclusion that the human rights debate has been entirely co-opted by political entities and linked to partisan ideas about how to induce change in North Korea. Yeo similarly sees a significant role for the state in the US context, arguing that state actors and discourse provided a preexisting discursive structure dating back to Cold War–era ideas around democracy promotion and civil and political rights. In both these cases, the insertion of (neo)conservative elements into the movement, while elevating the profile of the issue, also closed off network membership to activists and organizations not willing to associate themselves with what they saw as an increasingly politicized – and political – right-wing agenda. There is nothing natural about the association of the North Korean human rights issue with conservative ideology, and to understand how this has come about, the role of state structures and agents has proven to be important.

In Japan, the framing of the abductions issue as part of the broader story of North Korean human rights has taken place with a high level of coordination between state and nonstate actors. While a range of different categories of activists have all worked to shape the discourse on North Korean human rights, the strong involvement of the state in the abductions issue has influenced the trajectory of the domestic movement. Arrington describes the politics behind the signing of the 2006 North Korean Abductions and Human Rights Act, which consolidated the abductions issue as part of a broader human rights narrative. In Europe, while the issues at stake are very different from the Japanese context, here too activists work within a sphere that is already dominated by state institutions. EU dialogue with the DPRK tends to dominate the framework around which activism is formed in the EU. Here, the narrative is considerably less politicized than it is in Japan, South Korea, and the United States – most likely, as Narayan observes, because of the physical separation of the EU from the Northeast Asian region and its geopolitics. European nonstate actors, as noted earlier, thus work within a formal institutional template that has allowed direct interaction between state actors and the DPRK. We further explore the policy implications of this state–nonstate actor interaction in the final section of this chapter.

**Fractured but Effective: The Benefits of Adaptive Activism**

Finally, at the center of all these political debates lies the core question of which strategies will work best to draw North Korea into the fold of human
rights-respecting states. We argued in Chapter 1 that current models of human rights change, which revolve around transnational engagement with domestic actors, must be expanded to take into account mechanisms for change applied by actors within the North Korean human rights movement. As Baek (Chapter 11) discusses in detail, some activists have turned their attention to strategies directly targeted at North Korean citizens. We label this approach “subversive” for its tendency to bypass state structures altogether and breach the North Korean government’s information blockade.

At the heart of this subversive action is the motivating belief that change is impossible within the current political context and that the only way forward is to challenge the legitimacy of the North Korean regime by activating the consciousness of the North Korean people. Distinct from actors applying these sorts of direct mechanisms for change are activists that choose to work through the more well-worn pathways of state-centered diplomacy. As Goedde illustrates in Chapter 7, without local partners able to bring about change “from below,” some activists have focused their attention on bringing change from “above.” To do this, they must bring the state into the conversation, and it is in this context that legal mechanisms have become a key tool for activists. This approach differs substantially from that of activists promoting subversive change. Not only do these network actors work within the state-centric UN framework, their reliance on transnational legal mechanisms produces a top-down style of advocacy, contrasted with the bottom-up focus of those groups trying to plant the seeds of a grassroots movement.

As Goedde (Chapter 7), Chubb (Chapter 8), and Fahy (Chapter 10) all note, these twin approaches to the issue of North Korean human rights – pursuing change through top-down legal mechanisms and bottom-up information campaigns coupled with disruptive sanctions tactics – have worked to the advantage of the network. Actors have proven themselves adaptive insofar as they have leveraged off the success of each other. Actors advocating direct action actively participated in the COI information collection and cite the report as evidence of the legitimacy of their broader claims for change. Actors that prefer to work within UN structures have benefited directly from the profile of the dominant voices of the campaign – most of which align with the “direct action” side of the movement – in terms of raising awareness on North Korean human rights among the broader international community.

The North Korean human rights movement has also been notable for the role defector voices have played in providing important evidentiary weight to the movement’s core claims. The very use of the term “defectors” is a political act, and one adopted deliberately by the self-styled
“defector-activists.” Song, in Chapter 9, notes that defector narratives are shaped by a range of factors related to experiences following defection, which in turn shape the individual identities of defectors. There is no doubt, she argues, that the transnational agenda has conversely been shaped by the identity formation of these defectors, which coexists in a complex environment with human rights narratives. Without these defector voices – as complicated and at times controversial as they might be – the North Korean human rights movement would look very different today.

The evidence-based research undertaken by our contributors has provided a rich and varied understanding of how the North Korean human rights activist movement operates, the intranetwork dynamics at play, and the types of strategies adopted by actors in various parts of the movement. Their research provides nuance and depth to scholarly work that has previously approached the issue of North Korean human rights activism and policy from a normative perspective. This latter body of work tends to draw direct links between the motivations of actors interested in security issues on the Korean peninsula, and the human rights agenda of such actors. As we discuss in the next section, while the security–human rights linkage is certainly an important part of this story, it falls short in providing a comprehensive understanding of the actors and issues at play.

**HEGEMONY, IMPERIALISM, AND SCHOLARLY DEBATES ON NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS**

In our preface, and in Chubb’s contribution in Chapter 8, we acknowledged a two-part special issue on North Korean human rights in the journal *Critical Asian Studies (CAS)*, guest edited by Christine Hong and Hazel Smith. This special issue is perhaps one of the first major academic projects devoted to the topic of North Korean human rights published in English, and certainly one of the first to challenge the dominant framing of North Korean human rights. On the one hand, the CAS special issue provides a useful corrective to the overwhelming focus on political rights (that is: torture, political prisons, arbitrary arrest, execution, and so on) by including articles which

---

3 As Hosaniak notes, this term does not belong to official UN terminology, where North Koreans testifying about human rights abuses are more commonly referred to as victims.

4 Hong 2013. While Hong is the sole author of the introductory article, the journal lists both Hong and Smith as guest editors.

5 Other scholars have written about North Korean human rights, including critical perspectives, but usually as part of a larger study on North Korean politics and society or as a shorter stand-alone piece. Lankov 2013; Moon 2008; Smith 2014; Feffer 2004.
address the right to health, human security, and humanitarian and development assistance. On the other hand, we believe that the effort in the special issue’s framing introductory chapter to link the North Korean human rights movement to a wider imperialist agenda misconstructs the more complex dynamics of the advocacy network and the different domestic and transnational contexts in which North Korean human rights discourse has emerged. Because Hong’s focus on narrative resonates with our own examination of human rights discourse (and also because it precedes our work), we find it useful to engage with this perspective and advance what we believe to be a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of North Korean human rights activism.

In the CAS special issue’s introductory article, Hong seeks to expose the imperialist regime-change agenda underpinning the North Korean human rights enterprise. As Hong argues, the dominant framing of NKHR is “relatively presentist in its assignment of blame and politically harnessed to a regime-change agenda.” Hong continues that this agenda allows the human rights advocate to “assume a moralizing, implicitly violent posture towards a ‘regime’ commonsensically understood to be ‘evil,’” and thus to militarize the human rights agenda. Our research, to some degree, corroborates the findings and claims made in the CAS special issue. Reidhead’s analysis of the shift in human rights discourse in South Korea from a humanitarian framing to one of political rights is consistent with arguments made by several contributors to the CAS special issue. Yeo’s study on the significant role state actors play in shaping human rights discourse in US foreign policy, and the alignment between security and human rights in the framing of North Korea within US policy and activist communities, also supports what Smith identifies as “the unconscious adoption of a securitized perspective through which knowledge about North Korea is filtered.”

Despite these commonalities, however, we respectfully disagree with Hong’s depiction of the North Korean human rights advocacy movement, and the heavy emphasis on US hegemony as the key culprit driving North Korean human rights discourse and advocacy.

Earlier, Chubb noted that Hong failed to take into account the diversity of actors working on North Korean human rights and the complexity of the strategies deployed within the broader network. Here, it is worth recalling in full Hong’s characterization of the North Korean human rights movement:

---

The North Korean human rights project . . . has allowed a spectrum of political actors – US soft-power institutions, thinly renovated Cold War defense organizations, hawks of both neoconservative and liberal varieties, conservative evangelicals, anticommmunist Koreans in South Korea and the diaspora, and North Korean defectors – to join together in common cause . . . The past decade has been witness to the consolidation of a US funded transnational advocacy, propaganda and intelligence network under the elastic banner of North Korean human rights.¹⁴

We concur with Hong that many of the voices speaking on the North Korean human rights issue engage in a binary representation of tyranny and freedom, and that these voices are often the loudest and may even constitute the public face of the movement. Such findings were supported by several of our contributors and corroborated by the hyperlink analysis of NGOs provided in Chapter 8. However, neoconservative and liberal hawks, evangelicals, and anticommmunist South Koreans who might represent the hardline faction of the transnational movement do not constitute the totality of human rights activism. Nor do such binary categorizations underpin the language of the UN COI report, which we take as our standard for evaluating North Korean human rights discourse. Hong’s assertion that human rights “advocates figure, in the framework of North Korean human rights, as beneficiaries of future violence”¹⁵ derives from what we see to be at best an incomplete understanding of the network’s discourse, goals, strategies, and ideas. As we argued in this volume, activists are in fact nimble and demonstrate a remarkable ability to negotiate a contested normative frame.

The brand of North Korean human rights advocacy articulated in the CAS introductory piece (which is certainly not reflective of all the articles in the special issue) is in part due to what we see as a selective reading of North Korean human rights. The dominant human rights framing Hong portrays resembles arguments most prevalent in the United States in the early 2000s, when regime change rhetoric resonated with several leading voices within US-based advocacy networks. Yet, this framing is not indicative of the broader discussion on North Korean human rights which has, in the years since, taken place elsewhere – in Europe or in Japan, or at the UN or EU.

If at one point the dominant narrative of North Korean human rights revolved around regime change, today this is no longer the case, or at least it exists in conjunction with other narratives (that is, the accountability narrative). Our inquiry into the evolution of North Korean human rights

¹⁴ Hong 2013, 511, 518. ¹⁵ Hong 2013, 522.
discourse, and its relationship to the rise of a transnational advocacy movement, therefore assumes a more fluid understanding of narrative (and, by extension, discourse). Narratives and discourse are not static, despite the (re)production and recycling of evidence generated by North Korean defector testimonies, NGO reports, official government statements, and news media accounts.\footnote{Statements made by heads of government, key policymakers (including special representatives assigned to address North Korean human rights policy such as South Korea’s Minister of Unification or the US State Department’s Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights) and parliamentary leaders present an “official” discourse on North Korean human rights. As an analysis of the US State Department’s annual human rights report on North Korea indicates, this language is often derived from reports produced by NGOs. Much of the knowledge on North Korean human rights flows in a circular direction with NGOs and government agencies citing the other’s work, reifying an “official” narrative of NKHR.} Even when such discourses are embedded in deep-seated historical, institutional, and geopolitical structures, as Hong and Smith suggest, actors carry the potential to shift existing narratives as they interact with others. This is particularly true as new actors join the transnational advocacy fold. Issues of credibility notwithstanding,\footnote{The case of Shin Donghyuk, who fabricated parts of his story which was then published by \textit{Washington Post} reporter Blaine Harden, is often cited here. See Chapter 9 in this volume by Song, and also Song 2015.} North Korean defector-activists have given the transnational advocacy network a new voice since the early 2000s. A selection of NGOs, including some funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, do continue to talk about regime change. But many others do not, instead focusing their energies on social and economic issues, regime accountability, and the application of international law to prod the North Korean regime to comply with international norms and laws.

FROM SCHOLARLY DEBATES TO POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Putting aside important theoretical aims and scholarly debates, this project was foremost intended to provide activists, policymakers, students, and scholars a better understanding of the evolution of North Korean human rights advocacy. Much of this chapter has recapped various scholarly debates, ranging from new insights on transnational advocacy networks drawn from the case of North Korean human rights to a critique of critical perspectives on North Korea and the need for presenting evidence and facts from different points of view. Moving forward, the research and findings from this volume offer guidance and recommended courses of action for policymakers and activists.
Developing the Two-Pronged Strategy

We identified two different mechanisms for change in North Korean human rights: A legal/institutional approach which uses international law, sanctions, diplomacy, and other political measures to pressure and persuade the regime to comply with international human rights standards; and a more subversive, “hands-on” approach which attempts to work directly on the ground in North Korea by sending information into the country, or aiding defectors/refugees out of the country (and out of China, where they carry no legal standing).

Our research has shown that the two approaches have in fact complemented each other and should continue to be cultivated by state and nonstate actors in tandem. Critics may argue that a two-pronged approach sends mixed signals to North Korea. For instance, is the human rights advocacy network, and the international community more broadly, prodding the regime to adopt reforms to eventually enter the fold of international society? Or, on the contrary, does the advocacy network seek to undermine the regime, orchestrating its eventual demise? Human rights advocates, whether policymakers or grassroots activists, will remain divided on this point. However, given the slow and often nonlinear pace of human rights change, for the time being, both approaches, as top-down and bottom-up strategies, can be implemented without necessarily undermining the other’s long-term goal. If the regime begins to implement serious rights reforms – for instance, adopting domestic measures to improve the political and economic well-being of its citizens – then it may behoove activists to curtail more subversive tactics to encourage the regime to move ahead with political reforms. Information warfare may, in fact, be less relevant at this stage if the regime relaxes barriers to information. Conversely, if the North Korean regime remains unwilling to address gross human rights violations, despite legal repercussions, then a continuation or upward dialing of the information campaign and other “bottom up” approaches to bring about change at the individual and societal levels becomes warranted.

Adapting Human Rights Language to Account for the North Korean Context

Despite the North Korean regime being a signatory to the relevant UN conventions, our research shows that when engaging with North Korean officials, the language of human rights has an inflammatory effect, often shutting down dialogue precisely when it is most important to open channels
of communication. UN and other state-level policy officials may find it helpful to be mindful of this point, and to make efforts to adjust the discourse adopted in conversations with North Korean officials. This is not to say that human rights standards should be compromised, or even that the language of human rights should be jettisoned. Rather, as Goedde articulates at length, human rights are more likely to be diffused when they resonate with local norms and understandings.

This recommendation around localization and contextualization has implications for the two-pronged strategy described above. Information campaigns are more likely to be successful if they are able to adapt to the cultural context of the target population. This has certainly been the experience of North Korean defector radio stations. When radio broadcasts feature former North Koreans who are able to communicate in the appropriate vernacular and adopt a familiar style and cadence of talking via the medium of radio, they are more likely to resonate with local audiences. Likewise, information packets that frame human rights issues in relatable terms, or even draw directly on North Korea’s own laws and regulations to highlight the rights already available to disenfranchised communities, are more likely to resonate with those populations that are at highest risk in terms of human rights protection.

Adding a Third-Pronged Engagement Strategy

The localization of human rights language also has relevance when considering the adoption of a more expansive interpretation of human rights. North Korea may be more responsive to the pursuit of rights objectives if it is addressed more fulsomely through a more diverse set of discourses. Several of our contributors took note of the marginalization of economic and social issues in North Korean human rights advocacy; discourse on North Korea has evolved in such a way that humanitarian concerns are often seen as distinct from human rights objectives. Moreover, groups and actors focused on meeting the humanitarian needs of North Koreans are often associated with the “engagement” camp, whose mission, to some human rights activists, is perceived as antithetical to the human rights agenda. The gap between the human rights and the humanitarian assistance communities is also reinforced by discourse from within the engagement camp; some remain hostile to the human rights approach, assuming that its intent is to destroy rather than build up the North Korean state.

Yeò 2014.
Important professional and logistical boundaries certainly exist which justify treating humanitarian assistance as distinct from human rights. In particular, the delivery of food aid or medical supplies requires some degree of access into North Korea and interaction with North Korean counterparts. Denouncing the regime for human rights abuses would not endear UN or NGO workers to DPRK officials, making it difficult (if not dangerous) for them to conduct humanitarian or development operations. This is a trade-off that is familiar to the humanitarian community, where actors continually seek to strike a balance that is compliant and ethical.¹⁹

The gap between human rights and humanitarian/development assistance communities has narrowed in recent years, in no small part due to the COI’s explicit mention of “the right to food and related aspects of the right to life.”²⁰ However, more work needs to be done to remind policymakers and the public that meeting the economic needs of North Koreans, even via people-to-people engagement initiatives, is equally valid and important in the fight for human rights as outlined in the COI.

Roberta Cohen, co-chair emeritus of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK), has presented one of the strongest cases for linking human rights and humanitarian approaches within a comprehensive human rights framework. For instance, she recommends that the UN apply its “Human Rights Up Front” (HRuF) framework to North Korea. As an initiative from the UN Secretary-General, HRuF calls on the UN to take measures which would elevate human rights across the entire UN system, including organizations and agencies which address problems related to development, peace, and security.²¹ HRuF’s application to the DPRK would mean that UN organizations, particularly humanitarian and development agencies working inside North Korea, would “agree to take steps to monitor and promote human rights.”²² The HRuF approach has also been endorsed by the COI and the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the DPRK.²³ As Cohen argues, by making reference to human rights in the UN’s Strategic Framework for the DPRK, “humanitarian organizations would then have an entry point for

¹⁹ See, for example, Schloms 2003.
²⁰ UN Human Rights Council 2014, 10; 16. The COI report stated that the DPRK must “[e]nsure that citizens can enjoy the right to food and other economic and social rights without discrimination . . . promote agricultural, economic and financial policies based on democratic participation, good governance and non-discrimination; and legalize and support free market activities, internal and external trade and other independent economic conduct that provide citizens with a livelihood.”
²¹ For more on HRuF see the UN Secretary General webpage: www.un.org/sg/en/content/ban-ki-moon/human-rights-front-initiative.
raising with North Korean authorities the human rights principles the DPRK itself accepted at the UN’s Universal Periodic Review in 2014.”

These principles might include nondiscrimination in food distribution, access to the most vulnerable population, and gender equality. Other recommendations pairing political/civil with economic/social rights include granting access to healthcare in political prisons. In practice, this could mean providing aid workers access to administer tuberculosis vaccinations within the prison population.

Policy shifts as described above can help bridge the human rights and humanitarian divide. However, activists themselves must also begin to frame, or at least acknowledge, humanitarian engagement as a legitimate means of addressing human rights, including the right to food, shelter, and employment. While humanitarian groups may resist such linkages, in our discussions with NGO workers, we find that it is possible to build greenhouses, administer medication, or deliver food aid while still remaining fully cognizant of potential human rights abuses and quietly raising such concerns when opportune or warranted.

For the hardline human rights activists who remain critical of any form of engagement with North Koreans, two points are worth considering. First, if the goal of human rights is to free the oppressed from bondage (whether political or economic in nature, as the two are closely linked) and improve the lives of ordinary people, then many humanitarian and development engagement initiatives help achieve that goal, albeit on a small, localized scale.

Second, if bringing information about the outside world to North Koreans is a goal of human rights groups, then direct interaction between North Koreans and foreigners, particularly those from North America and Europe, may function as another channel of information. Americans involved in development, humanitarian, and/or business ventures in North Korea have commented on how their interactions with North Koreans have helped dispel existing myths about the “evil, ruthless American” which North Koreans are taught to believe the moment they begin school. Aside from perhaps defector surveys or anecdotal evidence, there is no way to measure if North Korean attitudes toward foreigners and foreign countries meaningfully shift (and if such shifts actually persist) over time as they repeatedly interact with the same foreign individuals for several years. But, if radio broadcasts are sufficient in prompting some North Koreans to question their government (or at least the message

---


26 Yeo is a member of the National Committee on North Korea whose membership includes many individuals pursuing engagement-oriented operations in North Korea. See Yeo 2017.
their government has been sending them), it would not be unreasonable to argue that people-to-people engagement might leave a positive, lasting impact on North Koreans’ attitudes toward the outside world (and perhaps conversely a negative view of their own leadership). In short, engagement strategies should not be shunned, but instead embraced by the advocacy network.

Exercising Caution to Avoid Conflating Human Rights with the Security Narrative

At the time of writing (late 2017), the security situation on the Korean peninsula has shifted from bad to worse. North Korea not only tested its first intercontinental ballistic missile with the potential range to hit major US cities, it also conducted its sixth nuclear test in September 2017. In the meantime, Washington and Pyongyang have been caught in a precarious spiral of escalatory rhetoric as each North Korean missile and nuclear test is met with additional calls for tighter sanctions against North Korea and isolation of the regime, and, by extension, the North Korean people. Unfortunately, the attention on the nuclear problem has once again cast a shadow over human rights issues.

As argued in our volume, a dominant narrative of North Korean human rights, particularly in the United States, is one which securitizes the human rights issue. From a strategic messaging standpoint, it makes perfect sense for human rights advocates to frame (or “frame align,” in academic parlance) their issue as a broader security problem. First, North Korea’s nuclear program and its abuse of human rights are linked, however loosely, in that both actions are a manifestation of the regime’s totalitarian nature. The regime maintains its legitimacy in part by creating a highly militarized state, justified by a narrative of the constant threat of war from the United States. The development of nuclear weapons feeds into this narrative, with resources for the military prioritized over the rest of the population. At the same time, the regime demands complete loyalty and authority to the Kim family, restricting freedoms and civil liberties to perpetuate both internal and external security. In short, if human rights and security are two sides of the same coin, then one can easily frame human rights as a security problem, and vice versa.

Second, most governments see North Korea as primarily a security problem. As such, human rights activists can leverage ongoing nuclear concerns to draw

---

27 See Kretchun and Kim 2012 for data on foreign media exposure and North Korea’s positive impression of the outside world.

28 “Security” here refers to international (or traditional) security rather than human security.
greater attention to the “evil” nature of the regime and its horrific abuses.\textsuperscript{29} The first George W. Bush administration (2000–4) effectively portrayed North Korea in such terms: not only is North Korea a nuclear proliferator, but it has the audacity to starve the masses and throw its people into the gulags.\textsuperscript{30} Conversely, human rights advocates remind those in the national security establishment that human rights (and related sanctions) serve as an additional pressure point to bend the regime toward compliance with international norms. The role played by human rights activist and blogger Joshua Stanton in the drafting of the 2016 North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act\textsuperscript{31} – which followed North Korea’s fourth nuclear test and places sanctions on North Korean entities found to be, among other things, engaging in proliferation activities or complicit in human rights abuses – is one example of how this interaction has taken form in Washington DC.\textsuperscript{32} In this way, the security community has used human rights as an additional point to justify isolation and sanctions against North Korea. It is no secret that the issue of North Korean human rights has attracted significant policy attention in part because of North Korea’s status as a nuclear proliferating state.

There may be merit in linking human rights with security issues.\textsuperscript{33} However, we recommend that human rights advocates in the policy and activist communities exercise caution in pushing the human rights–security nexus too far. One past consequence (particularly in the early 2000s) of the security–human rights nexus framing, as noted earlier, has been the dominance of conservative voices calling for regime change. While regime change may very well have been (and still remains) the end goal of some activists in the network, the association between North Korean human rights and regime change has had the unintended consequence of stigmatizing the issue as a conservative agenda. Although organizations dedicated to North Korean human rights, such as HRNK, have always approached the issue as a nonpartisan one, in practice activists from the political left, particularly in South Korea and the United States, remained peripheral in the advocacy network. This subsequently sidelined engagement voices early in the human rights movement – voices which should have been viewed as complementary to the larger objective of bringing human rights change. In turn, all forms of engagement, including people-to-people exchanges, were conflated with nuclear and diplomatic engagement.

\textsuperscript{29} Conversely, the security community has used human rights as an additional point to justify isolation and sanctions against North Korea.

\textsuperscript{30} Bush 2011, 422–3.

\textsuperscript{31} North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016, H.R. 757, 114th Congress.

\textsuperscript{32} Joshua Stanton runs the blog One Free Korea. See freekorea.us.

\textsuperscript{33} See Cha and Gallucci 2016.
Many in the human rights and humanitarian engagement camp today recognize the important work of other groups in facilitating change in North Korea, even if engagement groups still remain somewhat peripheral in the overarching North Korean human rights advocacy network. Nevertheless, the rapid advancement of North Korean nuclear and missile technology, and the dramatic escalation of tensions between the United States and North Korea, make it tempting to once again tag human rights onto security issues to prevent human rights from being completely subsumed by the nuclear problem. We do not deny the linkages between security and human rights, and to some extent they should be addressed in tandem. However, the international community now recognizes North Korean human rights as a grave issue, and the need to advance human rights in the DPRK can and should be articulated as an important issue in and of itself.

CONCLUSION

We simultaneously know so much and so little about North Korea. For two decades, human rights activists have collected, documented, and analyzed all available information to provide a persuasive outline of the restrictions and abuses experienced by everyday North Koreans. At the same time, we also know that ordinary North Koreans go about living their lives, experiencing human drama, tragedy, love, loss, and fulfillment as others do everywhere else in the world.34 Yet, despite all these insights, the humanity of North Koreans is often forgotten. When world leaders raise the possibility of military options against North Korea, where are the voices advocating the plight of the North Korean people? They are either missing or marginalized as the security of the Korean peninsula tends to be framed in military and not human terms.35 It is in this context that the work of North Korean human rights activists takes on its highest importance. The chapters in this volume provide empirically grounded, contemporary accounts of the debates, ideas, strategies, successes, and failures of the North Korean human rights movement. We have tried to make sense of the wide array of actors working on this issue, by examining their discourses and interrogating the nature of their relationships. Like all activist arenas, the North Korean human rights movement is one where a range of actors – none of them particularly powerful – vie for recognition, funding, and influence. It is an imperfect human rights space, and one from which everyday North Korean citizens are absent, with advocates all claiming to best represent

them. Yet as imperfect as this space is, it is the only place where the plight of the local North Korean people is given any serious consideration at all. For these reasons, an understanding of the evolution of North Korean human rights advocacy and discourse will continue to remain relevant as we and the international community anticipate the day the North Korean people are able to realize the promise of human rights and determine their own future.

REFERENCES


