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## What I Learned in North Korea

BY DOUG BANDOW

When I first visited North Korea a quarter century ago, the airplane was primitive and the airport was austere. My flight was the only one that day and the facility was not, shall we say, passenger friendly. Nor were the security personnel welcoming, especially after they discovered that I was carrying books—several copies of Cato’s conference volume on Korea to give to officials I met.

When I went in June, before the Trump administration banned American travel to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), I flew from Beijing on a modern Russian aircraft and arrived at a new, if largely deserted, airport. But the security gauntlet was more severe than before: an unsmiling guard checked my computer and carefully listed my electronic gadgets, down to two flash drives. The latter pose a particularly acute security risk, since flash drives often transport South Korean television shows, viewed as dangerously subversive by a totalitarian dynasty determined to maintain its control over the North Korean people.

Again, my flight was the only one that

day. At least the airport was modern, nicer than the facilities in some smaller American cities through which I’ve recently flown. Of course, Pyongyang is the only airport of consequence in the DPRK. The capital is the country’s international gateway, political center, and propaganda showcase.

What most dramatically sets the DPRK

apart from everywhere else, in appearance at least, is the personality cult based on the three Kims who have ruled since the country’s founding in 1948. That system even separates North Korea from “normal” communist nations.

The latter often have promoted official

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At Cato’s conference on The Future of the First Amendment, Cato’s EMILY EKINS presented the findings from the Cato Institute 2017 Free Speech and Tolerance Survey. Among the extensive poll’s many findings, nearly three-fourths of Americans believe that political correctness has done more to silence important discussions than to protect people, and 58 percent of Americans say that the political climate prevents them from saying things they believe.

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veneration of national revolutionary leaders, such as Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong. In these communist states, secondary officials also enjoyed varying degrees of attention. Moreover, Marx and Lenin, and sometimes other “founders” of communism, were treated as secular icons by the communist states they helped spawn.

But there is no such recognition in the North. There are plenty of statues, posters, pictures, and pins featuring the DPRK’s leaders. But only the DPRK’s leaders. All two of them: founder Kim Il-sung and his son, Kim Jong-il.

Unsurprisingly, family connections matter in communist regimes as in any other system. However, the North evolved into something completely unique, essentially a communist monarchy.

The Soviets chose Kim Il-sung to rule over their occupation zone in 1945, from which an independent DPRK arose. Kim died in 1994, succeeded by Kim Jong-il, distinguished by his bouffant hair, platform shoes, and oversize sunglasses. Kim Jong-un took over, a month shy of his 28th birthday, on his father’s death in December 2011.

Granddad and dad are everywhere: billboards along the road, pictures on buildings, photos in rooms (*every room!*), images on pins worn by members of the Workers’ Party of Korea. In contrast, Kim Jong-un, known as the Supreme Leader (his grandfather was the Great Leader and father, the Dear Leader) dominates current life, being at the center of, well, everything. He is in every discussion of every issue, no matter how seemingly trivial. Even the factory that makes children’s backpacks was, it turns out, designed, constructed, and operated “under the wise leadership of the Supreme Leader.” (My guide helpfully showed me one of the backpacks that Kim had personally cited as particularly appealing.)

While the Kims are everywhere, there is no one else. No other heroic North Korean revolutionaries. No other contemporary

“The result isn’t capitalism or anything close. But it isn’t Granddad’s North Korea either.”

communist party officials. And certainly no foreign figures, historical or otherwise.

In this, at least, there has been little change since my first visit. The major difference is the elevation of Kim Jong-il alongside Kim Il-sung. New construction has helpfully created a host of additional lobbies and walls that needed to be decorated with official images.

Propaganda posters featuring the activist, adoring, determined masses fill what little space remains across the city. There is no escape from politics, certainly neither in buildings nor on streets. Some posters focus on greater exertions at work. Others on unity against outside enemies. All emphasize submitting to the Supreme Leader.

Still, today Pyongyang looks more like a normal city than in 1992. Of course, just as Washington, D.C., is not America, Pyongyang is not North Korea—even more so. Under the DPRK’s notorious *Songbun* social classification system, those with good family pedigrees and who are trusted by the regime live in the capital or other cities. Those with more dubious backgrounds are stuck in the countryside—and often end up in prison camps. Pyongyang receives the most of everything.

In contrast, rural life is primitive at best. A quarter century ago I spent some time outside the capital. My trip was shorter this time, limiting me to Pyongyang. But I spoke with aid workers who said that rural life had not changed much.

In Pyongyang, however, the elite have begun to taste the good life. Most evident when leaving the airport was traffic. There now are private cars; stop lights actually fulfill a useful function. There’s new construction, much of it far more stylish (to the point of strange) than the dreary, box-like buildings that dominated the city in the past. A number of new facilities

and apartments, dedicated to educators and scientists, reflect Kim Jong-un’s professed emphasis on economic development.

### THIS ISN’T YOUR GRANDFATHER’S NORTH KOREA

One persistent disagreement between the DPRK and the People’s Republic of China had been economic reform. Kim Jong-il visited China many times, and his hosts would take him to Shanghai, point to the wonders of market-oriented development, and encourage him to follow China’s reform example. But Kim Jong-il would return home and continue with Stalinist economics. Presumably he believed that development, by rewarding the wrong people under the *Songbun* system, was inherently destabilizing.

Kim *film*, in contrast, apparently has decided to take the risk. Indeed, he calls his policy *Byungjin*, which means “parallel nuclear and economic development.” Officials with whom I talked declared that the DPRK was a political and military power and was seeking to become an economic power. The regime has poured a lot of money into education/science, the centerpiece of which is an expansive technology center shaped like an atom.

Even more significant is the spread of markets and adoption of economic reforms. Of course, the result isn’t capitalism or anything close. But it isn’t Granddad’s North Korea either. Farms and factories alike have gained more autonomy. The latter, while still state controlled, have been empowered to make more independent decisions. The regime has moved significantly forward but still has taken only a few small steps toward where the country needs to go.

Yet the regime is sensitive about even these modest reforms. I raised the question about greater reliance on “markets” with a couple of economic officials and they indignantly replied that North Korea is a socialist country. When I mentioned specific policies, they essentially shrugged their shoulders and said that individual markets had been adopted by the Eastern European socialist

countries and were part of socialism. But the North most certainly is not capitalist.

Which I'd already figured out without too much trouble.

Obviously, Pyongyang's approach is inherently limited. Still, the North Koreans appear to have learned that they need to satisfy their customers. On the flight from Beijing to Pyongyang I sat next to a Brit who was coming for his third tourism trip. He planned to take helicopter and microlight rides over the capital, something that would have been inconceivable when I first visited. Allowing any foreigner, especially from a nation allied with America, to overfly the city would have been viewed as a security threat. Now it is seen as a profit-making opportunity.

My hotel also understood the importance of consumer choice. The restaurant employed a picture book to ease the burden on Western visitors. The resulting meals matched my selections. In 1992 the restaurant staff didn't consult me on my preferences—they simply brought food which bore a sometimes-vague relationship to common Western dishes. I didn't go hungry, but it wouldn't have been a winning business model in America.

Kim's commitment to economic development provides both opportunity and vulnerability. The 33-year-old presumably understands that national power requires a strong economic foundation, and that is possible only through more market-oriented policies. However, those offer the greatest benefit when twinned with international openness. So the regime has been attempting to attract foreign investment and trade, even from Western nations, given North Korean unease at being so dependent on China. Officials commented that they didn't want to rely on any nation, an obvious jab at Beijing's oversized role in the North—and perceived lack of trustworthiness in resisting sanctions. However, sanctions discourage foreign economic ties, and the barriers will only increase with the latest rounds of penalties, which the People's Republic of China has committed to enforce.

Which means dissatisfaction is likely to

Dissatisfaction is likely to grow among those who have tasted the benefits of economic growth. //

grow among those who have tasted the benefits of economic growth. The spread of private cars is but one sign of an improved standard of living in the capital. Women have discovered fashion. Most men still dress plainly, but unlike 25 years ago women sport high heels, attractive skirts, and brightly colored blouses. This trend may have been encouraged by the stylish Ri Sol-ju, who has been photographed out and about with her husband, the Supreme Leader.

Mobile phones also are common. My handlers texted while I took in the sights. I observed people buying food from small corner shops, absent in 1992. The DPRK also has created its own intranet, which is as likely to increase as slake the demand for information. In 1992 even the *nomenklatura* might not have suffered much from tougher sanctions. Today the pain will be much greater.

Still, there should be no illusions about the imminence of a "North Korean Spring." Those who challenge the Supreme Leader risk death—he has freely executed top officials, including his uncle. But pervasive discontent could erode regime control.

What will happen as the supply of hard currency shrinks due to sanctions, which increasingly restrict exports as well as North Korean enterprises abroad? Officials with whom I spoke in June appeared to be anticipating a lonelier future, proudly talking about how they were achieving self-sufficiency in numerous areas. But their praise for autarky won't be able to disguise the negative impact on economic development.

#### THE CENTRALITY OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Nevertheless, the regime has chosen nukes over economics. If there was one clear

message from my trip, it is that the North is a nuclear state and determined to remain a nuclear state. Kim & Co. say they are unwilling to negotiate away their nuclear weapons.

The first nuclear crisis occurred shortly after my first visit, when the Clinton administration considered military strikes against North Korean nuclear facilities. Instead, negotiations resulted in the Agreed Framework, which froze Pyongyang's nuclear activities in return for a promise by the United States and its allies to construct a new light-water nuclear reactor. The pact collapsed amid charges of DPRK perfidy and U.S. faithlessness.

Whether the North was ever willing to bargain away its nuclear potential is unknown, at least outside of Pyongyang. But the regime is unlikely to do so today. The Kims have spent too much and achieved too much to abandon a program with which they have identified the dynasty. The constitution proclaims the DPRK to be a nuclear state; at every turn, the Supreme Leader embraces both the missile and nuclear programs. Military imagery pervades North Korean life.

Nukes also provide substantial benefits for the regime: international status (otherwise no one would pay attention to a small, impoverished, distant state), neighborly extortion (requests for aid receive greater consideration when accompanied by a show of nuclear weapons), and domestic politics (providing the biggest weapon is one means to secure the military's loyalty). But Pyongyang's most important objective is regime preservation and national security, which the Kims view as one and the same.

The North stands alone in a dangerous world. The Republic of Korea (ROK) has 45 times the gross domestic product and twice the population of the DPRK. Onetime colonial overlord and current ally Japan lurks nearby. And America, the global superpower, maintains an alliance with and troops in the South. North Korea's Korean War allies, Russia and China, would not rescue it.

It is Washington against which Pyongyang's missile and nuclear programs are directed. In

“The United States might not like what it finds, but it must deal with North Korea as it is, not as Americans wish it to be.”

my meetings DPRK officials pointed to America’s “hostile policies” and its “military threats” and “nuclear threats.” No doubt, such claims are politically convenient. But the North well illustrates how even paranoids have enemies.

The problem is not just that the United States is “over there,” constantly reminding Pyongyang that “all options are on the table.” Since the end of the Cold War, when North Korea’s chief allies faded away, Washington also has become much more aggressive. My DPRK interlocutors pointed to America’s proclivity for removing disfavored regimes, such as Afghanistan and fellow “Axis of Evil” member Iraq. The example of Libya was particularly disconcerting: after Muammar el-Qaddafi gave up his nuclear and missile programs, the West used the Arab Spring uprising as an opportunity to take him out. Kim decided that he would never make the same mistake.

So, the North wants a deterrent against the United States. That’s obviously disconcerting for Americans, but Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union possessed the ability to devastate the United States. Since then Maoist China, Hindu nationalist India, and unstable Islamic Pakistan acquired the bomb. The North Korea problem is neither new nor unique. Kim Jong-un is evil, not suicidal. He wants his virgins—and a lot more—in this world, not the next one.

Still, mistakes and misjudgments are possible. One hates to imagine America’s survival being dependent on Kim’s good behavior. What should Washington do?

#### BEYOND THE STATUS QUO

When I asked my hosts if the DPRK would be willing to abandon its nukes if the United

States dropped its “hostile policy,” I was told the North would be happy to discuss the issue—if the United States, Russia, China, and the other nuclear states were willing to abandon their nuclear weapons. We all know how likely that is.

Which leaves a dangerous impasse. Negotiations won’t convince Pyongyang to disarm. Ever-tighter sanctions will hurt the regime but not likely force it to yield. In the late 1990s a half million or more North Koreans starved to death because of famine, yet the government refused to change course. Military strikes likely would trigger a Second Korean War, with casualty estimates starting in the tens of thousands. Seoul, the ROK’s capital, almost certainly would be devastated.

Washington needs to look beyond status quo solutions. The Trump administration should talk with Pyongyang and consider pushing intermediate objectives, such as freezing the North’s nuclear program: better to confront a North Korea with a stable arsenal of 20 nuclear weapons than a stockpile of 100 and growing.

The State Department should lift its ban on Americans traveling to the DPRK: every Western visitor gives the lie to government propaganda about the world and erodes the regime’s internal credibility. The United States

also should negotiate with China, addressing the latter’s security concerns, in an attempt to convince Beijing to apply greater pressure on the North. For instance, Chinese officials do not want a reunited Korea allied with America with U.S. troops along their border.

With the South well able to defend itself conventionally, Washington should begin disentangling itself militarily from the peninsula, ending the direct confrontation with North Korea. The United States also should consider encouraging the creation of a South Korean and even Japanese nuclear deterrent in response to the North. That course should not be taken lightly, but America has nothing at stake in the peninsula that warrants risking American cities. Moreover, mere discussion of the possibility would put pressure on Beijing to take more forceful action against Pyongyang.

“Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma,” Winston Churchill once said. Even more would that seem to apply to North Korea, which is so easy to demonize and ridicule. But it is imperative to understand a system which justifiably fills Americans with horror. We can’t craft effective policy if we don’t understand what we face.

The North increasingly has opened its door to the world, and the regime’s aims are no mystery, even if lodged inside an enigma. The United States might not like what it finds, but it must deal with North Korea as it is, not as Americans wish it to be. That doesn’t make solutions any easier to find. But Washington’s principal duty is to promote peace on the peninsula. In time, we all should hope, the North Korean people will enjoy liberty and prosperity. ■

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