

The Global Community Has the Power To Stop North Korea's Aggression

OPINION: In confronting the security threat it poses, we can't ignore its human rights atrocities.

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North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

AP / Wong Maye-E

North Korea's claimed hydrogen-bomb test and recent satellite launch are only the latest examples of the ruling regime's saber-rattling brinkmanship on the global stage.

That brinkmanship has resulted in near unanimous votes in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate to toughen sanctions on North Korea over its nuclear program, human rights record and cyber activities — passing the North Korea Sanctions Enforcement Act of 2016. In addition, its saber-rattling strengthened the resolve of the United Nations Security Council to pass on March 2 its toughest resolution in decades.

The brinkmanship has also spurred South Korea, lagging behind Japan and the United States, to consider passing its own North Korea Human Rights Act. South Korea also announced last month that it was shuttering the Kaesong Industrial Complex in the border town of the same name, and one of the only jointly run economic linkages between the two countries.

STATE OF 'RIGHTLESSNESS'

Collectively, the world has grown weary of North Korea's military and economic contempt, particularly as it has served to distract attention away from the regime's perpetual human "rightlessness," a term I coined to describe North Korea.

This state of rightlessness is most horrifically expressed in the North Korean concentration camps, which unlike any other, punishes multiple generations of family members through guilt by association. Human rights groups have conservatively estimated that more than 1 million people have been murdered by the regime, which the leadership of the Holocaust Museum in Illinois dubbed a "Holocaust in slow motion."

The country as a whole can be seen as one large jail. The people are under constant surveillance, as everyone is viewed as a potential informant. One cannot even cross the street in Pyongyang without permission. Attempting to leave the country is a criminal offense, and border guards are ordered to shoot to kill on sight, even children.

Even those in prominent positions are not immune to this regime of rightlessness. In 2013, supreme leader Kim Jong-un summarily executed his uncle, the No. 2 in the regime's hierarchy and, more recently, he reportedly executed the chief of staff of the North Korean Army in similarly abrupt fashion. Immaterial acts such as disco dancing, demonstrating disrespect to senior leadership and petty theft (reportedly of even a single kernel of corn) have all met with a peremptorily marshaled death sentence — in an unrelenting reign of terror.

Government propaganda dominates the North Korean educational system as well as the government-monopolized media. The supreme ruler and his party willfully override even the provisions in their own North Korean Constitution, making all the supposed rights therein completely illusory. Such rightlessness calls forth a convoy of lies and ruthless illusions to mask and rationalize the atrocities.

In October, Admiral William Gortney, the Northern command officer in charge of defending the United States from long-range missile attack, relayed to the media that North Korea is now capable of hitting the United States with just such a missile (a variant of the KN-08 road-mobile missile). Testing appears to be ongoing with no signs of relenting.

ROGUE REGIMES

Compounding matters, North Korea, as the fourth-largest military in the world, has become a chief proliferator of arms and military know-how into the hands of other rogue regimes. For example, North Korea has sold tanks, nuclear technology and bunker technology to Syria. Yet so much more attention is given to the Middle East recipients than to the North Korean providers.

Although we are at a critical crisis stage, it also presents a great opportunity: to demonstrate to the world that the United States, South Korea and the U.N. Security Council are willing to meet aggressive behavior with equally strong - diplomacy. Through our response, we can set the stage to invoke change in a regime that has precipitated the worst combined security/human rights crisis in the world.

The top leadership of North Korea fears judicial accountability, whether through the International Criminal Court, a partially domestic/partially international hybrid tribunal, or through in-absentia (without the defendants present) prosecution in a South Korean court as Korean nationals. This prospect of human rights accountability should be woven tightly into our diplomacy. Instead of the historic cordoning off of human rights matters in order to focus on security matters, it would be potentially more effective to raise both human rights and security together — each reinforcing the other.

Seeking to co-lead a solution with China would be equally helpful, as China holds more cards with respect to North Korea than any other country. China, as the traditional hegemon of the region and an indisputable world power, needs to realize that its interests are far better served resolving the North Korean crises than in propping up a failed government. North Korea's corrupt, unjust and oppressive rightlessness will eventually cease to exist; it's just a question of how and when the major changes will come.

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