

"What Did You Do as We Were Dying?"

The Urgency of Addressing North Korean Human Rights

During the Moon Jae-In administration, many of my American friends and colleagues were puzzled and disappointed by a strange contradiction. The former pro-democracy activists—who had fought for democracy and human rights in South Korea—had entered the Blue House, only to turn a blind eye to serious human rights abuses in the North. In particular, the Moon administration punished activists who sent leaflet balloons across the border and forcibly repatriated two North Korean fishermen who had been detained in South Korean waters. It not only cut the budget for providing resettlement assistance to North Korean escapees, but also stopped co-sponsoring United Nations (UN) resolutions that expressed concern about the human rights situation in North Korea. My friends, including individuals who had supported South Korea's pro-democracy movement decades ago, asked me to explain this perplexing state of affairs. I had no clear answer.

A GROSS OVERSTEPPING OF AUTHORITY

On April 15, 2021, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a congressional hearing on "civil and political rights in the Republic of Korea."¹ The speakers expressed their concern about worrying trends in South

Korea's democracy. In his opening remarks, Rep. Chris Smith, the co-chair of the commission, stated that "the power that had been given [to] the Moon Administration, including a supermajority in the National Assembly, has led to a gross overstepping of authority." He observed that "in addition to passing laws which restrict freedom of expression, we have seen politicization of prosecutorial powers. . . and the harassment of civil society organizations, particularly those engaged on North Korea issues."² Expressing his disappointment at the Moon administration's North Korea policy, Smith twice referred to my 2020 analysis of South Korea's "democratic decay" published in the *Journal of Democracy*.³

Rep. James McGovern, the other co-chair of the Tom Lantos Commission, noted in his remarks that "international human rights law provides guidance on what is and is not acceptable when it comes to restricting freedom of expression for security reasons."⁴ This hearing had echoes of U.S. congressional hearings in the 1970s, when there was criticism of South Korea's authoritarian practices.

South Korea's progressives, including those who served in the Moon administration, may respond that criticizing North Korea for its human rights practices infringes upon Pyongyang's sovereignty. They may argue

1 Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, "Civil and Political Rights in the Republic of Korea: Implications for Human Rights on the Peninsula," April 15, 2021, <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/events/hearings/civil-and-political-rights-republic-korea-implications-human-rights-peninsula-0>

2 Rep. Christopher H. Smith, "Opening Remarks," April 15, 2021, https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/sites/humanrights-commission.house.gov/files/documents/Opening%20Remarks_SKorea_CHS_Final.pdf.

3 Gi-Wook Shin, "South Korea's Democratic Decay," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2020): 100–14, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/south-koreas-democratic-decay/>.

4 This comment was made in relation to the so-called anti-leaflet law that was passed by the ruling Democratic Party of Korea during the Moon administration. One of the primary justifications for the law given by its proponents was that launching leaflet balloons across the border could prompt an armed response from North Korea, thereby endangering the security of South Koreans living near the border. See Rep. James P. McGovern, "Opening Remarks," https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/sites/humanrightscommission.house.gov/files/documents/Opening%20Remarks_SKorea_JPM_Final.pdf.

*Gi-Wook Shin is the director of the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center and the William J. Perry Professor of Contemporary Korea in the Sociology Department and the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. He is the author/editor of 25 books, including *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea and Divergent Memories*. This essay originally appeared in Korean in the February 2023 issue of Sindonga (New East Asia), Korea's oldest monthly magazine (established 1931), in a series of monthly essays about contemporary issues in Korea.*

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that emphasizing human rights will worsen inter-Korean relations and make it even more difficult to address the security threat posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles. This argument may appear to have some face validity, since Pyongyang has responded to criticisms of its human rights record with fiercely hostile rhetoric. The same progressives, however, did not regard it as an encroachment upon South Korea's sovereignty when the U.S. government and American civil society criticized Seoul for its human rights violations during the 1970s and 80s. In fact, they sought support from various actors in America and welcomed external pressure upon South Korea's authoritarian governments during their fight for democracy.

We must ask ourselves whether the Moon administration achieved durable progress in inter-Korean relations or on denuclearizing North Korea by sidelining human rights. There is no empirical evidence to support the assertion that raising human rights will damage inter-Korean relations or complicate negotiations surrounding North Korea's nuclear program. While there are valid concerns about how Pyongyang may react, it is also true that past efforts have failed to achieve progress on nuclear weapons or human rights. Both the Moon and Trump administrations sidelined human rights in their summit diplomacy with Kim Jong-Un, and their efforts came to naught. They compromised their principles, but to what end?

This is not to say that raising human rights issues would certainly have yielded tangible progress in improving inter-Korean relations or dismantling Pyongyang's nuclear weapons. Rather, I like to point out that there is no reason or evidence to believe that there is an obvious link between raising human rights in a sustained, principled

manner and the success or failure of diplomatic engagements with Pyongyang. The arguments given by South Korea's progressives are not sufficient to justify neglecting human rights concerns when addressing North Korea. Furthermore, criticizing another country's human rights practices is not seen as an unacceptable violation of state sovereignty. The international community regards such discussions on human rights as a legitimate form of diplomatic engagement.

THE ERROR OF ZERO-SUM THINKING

The abject state of human rights in North Korea is not a matter of debate. In addition to the operation of political prison camps and the imposition of draconian restrictions on the freedoms of thought, expression, and movement, the country suffers from a severe food crisis. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's September 2022 *International Food Security Assessment* estimated that close to 70% of the country's population was "food insecure."⁵ The border closure imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a sharp decline in trade with China, which plays a vital role in North Korea's economy. By all indications, the people of North Korea are likely to be in dire straits. James Heenan, the head of the UN Human Rights Office in Seoul, stated in December 2022 that the human rights situation in North Korea is a "black box" due to difficulties in obtaining information as a result of COVID-19 border controls.⁶ Freedom House's 2022 report gave North Korea 0 points out of 40 in political rights, and 3 out of 60 in civil liberties, resulting in a total score of 3 out of 100. Only South Sudan, Syria, and Turkmenistan have lower scores.⁷

Nonetheless, Pyongyang continues to pour an enormous amount of resources into developing nuclear weapons and advanced missile capabilities. According to South Korean government estimates, North Korea spent over \$2 million on launching 71 missiles in 2022. This was enough to buy over 500,000 tons of rice, which could provide sufficient food for North Korea's population for 46 days. The same amount would also have made up for over 60% of North Korea's estimated food shortfall of 800,000 tons in 2023.⁸ In its single-minded pursuit of nuclear weapons

5 Jacob A. Zereyesus et al., *International Food Security Assessment, 2022-32* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2022), 56, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=104707>.

6 This office, established pursuant to a recommendation by the UN Commission of Inquiry on North Korean human rights, monitors human rights in North Korea. For further details on Heenan's remarks, see "U.N. Agency Head Says N. Korea's Human Rights Situation in 'Black Box,'" *Yonhap News*, December 6, 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20221206008700325>.

7 *Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2022), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>.

8 Park Soo-Yoon, "North Korea Spent 46 Days' Worth of Food on Firing Missiles, With Reports of Starvation Deaths in Hamgyong Province" [in Korean], *Yonhap News*, December 19, 2022, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20221219095700504>.

and ballistic missiles, the North Korean regime has shown utter disregard for the human rights of its population.

The details of North Korea's human rights record are available for anyone to see in the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on North Korean human rights, as well as the U.S. State Department's annual country reports on human rights practices.⁹ In particular, a 2014 report published by the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on North Korean human rights found that "systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, its institutions and officials." Moreover, the COI concluded that "in many instances, the violations of human rights found by the commission constitute crimes against humanity."¹⁰

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North Korea's headlong pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles is inextricably tied to the human rights situation in the country. When allocating available resources, Pyongyang prioritizes the strengthening of its military capabilities. The health, well-being, and human rights of the population are of peripheral concern. An array of international sanctions imposed against the regime may constrain its budget, but it will pass on the cost to the population, further worsening their suffering. In addition, there can be no meaningful solution to security issues without improving the human rights situation. A government that values military strength over the welfare of its people will not hesitate to use force against other countries.

The North Korean nuclear problem, inter-Korean relations, and human rights issues are closely intertwined, which necessitates a comprehensive approach

to North Korea policy. Ignoring human rights does not make it easier to achieve progress on security issues. Victor Cha refers to this as the "error of zero-sum thinking about human rights and U.S. denuclearization policy."¹¹ There is an urgent need to formulate a holistic approach that can foster mutually beneficial engagements between Pyongyang, Seoul, and Washington. Reflecting upon the shortcomings of past U.S. policy toward North Korea, Cha notes that marginalizing human rights has not yielded any meaningful progress on the nuclear problem. He argues that it is first necessary to craft a comprehensive strategy that fosters positive-sum dynamics between security issues and human rights. This strategy will then provide a road map for future negotiations by specifying the standards and principles that should be observed.

AVOIDING DEMONIZATION AND POLITICIZATION

To generate positive-sum dynamics between human rights and security issues, it is important to refrain from demonizing North Korea. Taking a moralistic approach along the lines of the Bush administration's "axis of evil" will do little to improve the human rights situation in North Korea. The purpose of raising human rights issues must not be to tarnish the North Korean leader's reputation or to weaken the regime. As Ambassador Robert King, the former U.S. special envoy on North Korean human rights issues, stressed during a recent interview with *Sindonga*, human rights should not be weaponized for political purposes.¹² The world must call upon North Korea to improve its human rights record as a responsible member of the international community. If Pyongyang shows a willingness to engage, other countries should be ready to assist.

North Korea usually responds with aggressive rhetoric to criticisms of its human rights record, but it has taken tangible steps to engage on certain occasions. Even as it denounced the February 2014 report of the UN COI, North Korea sent its foreign minister to speak at the UN General Assembly in September for the first time in 15 years. In October, Jang Il-Hun, North Korea's deputy permanent representative to the UN in New York, participated in a seminar at the Council on Foreign Relations

9 For the UN reports, see "Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-dprk>; for country reports, see "2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: North Korea," U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/north-korea/>.

10 United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, UN Doc. A/HRC/25/63 (2014), para. 80, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/co-idprk/commission-inquiry-on-h-r-in-dprk>

11 Victor Cha, "The Error of Zero-Sum Thinking about Human Rights and U.S. Denuclearization Policy," in *The North Korean Conundrum: Balancing Human Rights and Nuclear Security*, eds. Robert R. King and Gi-Wook Shin (Stanford: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2022), 157–78.

12 Soo-Kyung Kim, "An Interview with Former Special Envoy Robert King" [in Korean], *Sindonga*, December 30, 2022, <https://shindonga.donga.com/3/home/13/3842527/1>.

to discuss North Korean human rights.¹³ Even though it forcefully denies the international community's criticism, North Korea appears to have realized that it cannot simply sweep the issue under the rug. Some argue that North Korea's limited engagements on human rights are empty political gestures to divert attention. Nonetheless, North Korea also understands that it must improve its human rights record if it hopes to establish diplomatic relations with the United States.

Instead of using human rights as a cudgel to demonize North Korea, it is vital to identify specific issues where it may be willing to cooperate. So far, it has refused to engage on issues that could undermine regime stability, such as closing political prison camps, ending torture, and guaranteeing freedom of the press. On the other hand, it has shown an interest in discussing issues that do not pose an immediate political threat, such as improving the situations of women, children, and persons with disabilities. By seeking avenues for dialogue and cooperation, the international community can try to achieve slow but tangible progress on improving the human rights situation in North Korea.

We must also avoid the temptation to politicize human rights. Recall, for instance, the early days of the Trump administration. As tensions with North Korea flared, the Trump administration used human rights as a political tool to amplify negative attitudes toward Pyongyang. In addition to inviting North Korean escapees to the White House, Trump spent over 10% of his 2018 State of the Union address discussing North Korea, focusing specifically on human rights. He said that “no regime has oppressed its own citizens more totally or brutally than the cruel dictatorship in North Korea.”¹⁴ However, as he began to hold summit meetings with Kim Jong-un to discuss the nuclear issue, human rights disappeared from the agenda. The Trump administration used human rights as a means to a political end, while the summit meetings in Singapore and Hanoi were all show and no results.

The Moon administration made the same mistake, only in a different form. As noted above, it ignored the human rights issue out of political considerations. It sought to improve inter-Korean relations above all else, despite concerns that it was neglecting human rights

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in doing so. It criminalized the act of sending leaflet balloons across the demilitarized zone (DMZ), and it forcibly repatriated two North Korean fishermen through the Joint Security Area at Panmunjom. The latter decision, which continues to generate controversy in South Korea, would have remained secret if reporters had not taken a picture of a text message sent to a National Security Council official.¹⁵ The two fishermen were not given the right to legal representation and were denied due process. Moreover, the decision violated South Korea's Constitution, which recognizes North Korean escapees as citizens. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states in article 2 that “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind.” It adds that “no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs.”¹⁶ However, the Moon administration was driven by its political goals in deciding to forcibly repatriate the two individuals.

A UNIVERSAL ISSUE THAT DEMANDS BIPARTISAN SUPPORT

North Korea's human rights situation may be especially dire, but human rights violations are certainly not confined to its borders. They took place under South Korea's authoritarian regimes in the past, and serious violations are committed today in countries such as China, Russia, and Myanmar. Liberal democracies, including the United States and the United Kingdom, also have shortcomings in their human rights record. In its preamble, the UDHR proclaims that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights

13 “Ambassador Jang Il Hun on Human Rights in North Korea,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 20, 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/event/ambassador-jang-il-hun-human-rights-north-korea>.

14 Robert R. King, “North Korean Human Rights in the 2018 and 2019 State of the Union Addresses—What a Difference a Year Makes,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-korean-human-rights-2018-and-2019-state-union-addresses-what-difference-year-makes>.

15 Kim Joon-Young, “Ministry of Unification Issues Statement on Forcible Repatriation after Text Message is Caught on Camera” [in Korean], *JoongAng Ilbo*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/23627798>.

16 United Nations, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”¹⁷

Human rights is a universal issue. The Yoon Suk-Yeol administration has declared its support for liberal democratic values, and it should approach the North Korean human rights issue as part of its value-based diplomacy. Moreover, it should not set preconditions for humanitarian assistance. As stipulated in article 8 of South Korea’s North Korean Human Rights Act, enacted in 2016, humanitarian assistance to North Korea must “be delivered transparently in accordance with internationally recognized delivery standards,” and it must “be provided preferentially for vulnerable social groups, such as pregnant women and infants.”¹⁸

Even in an era of extreme polarization in American politics, there is a robust and genuine bipartisan consensus on North Korean human rights. As noted above, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission is co-chaired by a Democrat and a Republican. The U.S. North Korean Human Rights Act, enacted in 2004, was last reauthorized in 2018 with unanimous support in the House and the Senate. This law generated momentum for Japan (2006) and South Korea (2016) to pass their own legislation on North Korean human rights.

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In South Korea, however, the issue continues to be heavily politicized and polarized. Progressives tend to minimize the issue or neglect it altogether, while conservatives are usually vocal about drawing attention to the human rights situation in North Korea. Instead of approaching the issue from the standpoint of universal values, discussions about North Korean human rights are mired in partisan political divisions. Working toward a bipartisan consensus on North Korean human rights would be a worthy goal. Furthermore, there must be greater efforts to listen to and incorporate the voices and

opinions of North Korean escapees who have resettled in South Korea.

The Yoon administration has taken encouraging steps. Last summer, President Yoon appointed Professor Lee Shin-wha of Korea University as the ambassador-at-large for North Korean human rights, a position that had been vacant since September 2017. South Korea has also resumed its co-sponsorship of UN resolutions on the state of human rights in North Korea. However, the North Korean Human Rights Foundation, which was supposed to have been created pursuant to the 2016 North Korean Human Rights Act, remains stuck on the ground.¹⁹ This foundation should be launched as soon as possible, and the government should also enhance resettlement assistance to North Korean escapees.

Lastly, it goes without saying that there should be bipartisan cooperation to secure the release of six South Korean citizens who are currently detained in North Korea. On February 7, Jung Pak, the deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, met with family members of the detained citizens in Seoul in a joint meeting with Ambassador Lee Shin-wha.²⁰ South Korea’s National Assembly should also play its part to draw attention to the issue.

MULTILATERAL AND BILATERAL APPROACHES

South Korea should fully utilize the institutions of the UN in addressing North Korean human rights. Pyongyang is highly sensitive to human rights criticisms issued by individual countries, but it has shown some willingness to engage with the UN’s human rights mechanisms. This is because it wants to be recognized as a legitimate member of the international community. North Korea has participated in the Universal Periodic Review, in which all UN member states are subject to a review of their human rights record every four and a half years. In 2017, it permitted a visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of

17 United Nations, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

18 Korea Law Information Center, “North Korean Human Rights Act,” <https://www.law.go.kr/lsInfoP.do?lsiSeq=181623&viewCls=engLsInfoR#0000>.

19 The Democratic Party of Korea has persistently failed to appoint its allocated quota of five individuals to the foundation’s board of directors, and the Ministry of Unification has spent nearly \$2 million on office rent and personnel costs to no avail. See Oh Soo-Jeong, “North Korean Human Rights Foundation Idle for Six Years, Nearly \$2 million Spent on Rent Alone” [in Korean], *NoCut News*, October 6, 2022, <https://www.nocutnews.co.kr/news/5828493>.

20 “U.S. to Continue Efforts to Free S. Koreans Detained by N. Korea: Washington Official,” *Yonhap News*, February 7, 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230207009400325>.

persons with disabilities. Most recently, in 2021, it submitted its Voluntary National Review, which assesses its progress in implementing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.²¹ By working with and through international institutions, South Korea can increase the effectiveness and legitimacy of its efforts to address the human rights situation in North Korea. It can also sidestep direct criticism from Pyongyang.

Cooperation with the United States is also vital. During its first two years, the Biden administration did not take significant steps to draw attention to North Korea's human rights. This stood in sharp contrast to the administration's vocal condemnation of human rights violations in China, as well as Russia's atrocities in Ukraine. On January 23, the White House finally appointed Julie Turner—the director of the Office of East Asia and the Pacific in the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor—as the nominee for the special envoy on North Korean human rights. This position, created by the U.S. North Korean Human Rights Act, had remained vacant since Ambassador King stepped down in January 2017. This could indicate that the Biden administration is moving toward a more proactive approach on human rights issues in North Korea.

I have previously characterized the Biden administration's North Korea policy as one of “strategic neglect.” North Korea is seen as a hot potato, and there is a prevailing tendency in Washington to avoid touching the problem altogether.²² Ambassador Sung Kim is serving as the U.S. ambassador to Indonesia, and he is serving as the U.S. special representative for North Korea in essentially a part-time capacity. Jung Pak has been coordinating relevant policy issues in the State Department, but there has not been a visible shift in North Korea policy, with the exception of her recent visit to Seoul to meet with family members of South Korean citizens detained in North Korea. There are many high-level officials in the Biden administration's foreign policy and national security team

with prior experience of North Korea issues, and they understand that diplomatic engagements with Pyongyang are unlikely to yield meaningful results. North Korea's barrage of missile tests is intended, in part, to draw the attention of the United States, but the response from Washington has been lukewarm.

In line with Victor Cha's recommendations, Seoul should work closely with Washington to craft a comprehensive strategy that fosters positive-sum dynamics between human rights and nuclear issues. Last month, there were reports that Seoul was “pushing for the resumption of bilateral consultations with the United States on the North Korean human rights problem.”²³ Ambassador Lee Shin-wha is a highly capable expert with a deep understanding of both the UN and the United States, and she will be able to play an important role in these efforts. Congress should move quickly to confirm Julie Turner as her counterpart, so that they can formulate and implement a bilateral strategy to address human rights issues in North Korea.

Lastly, Seoul should work with Beijing on these issues. China has serious human rights issues of its own, including the situation in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. It is also directly implicated in North Korean human rights issues. Despite

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requests from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Beijing continues to forcibly repatriate North Korean escapees who are arrested in China. Available testimony suggests that many escapees who are returned in this manner end up being imprisoned in political prison camps or executed. In his memoir, *Patterns of Impunity*, Ambassador Robert King notes that he urged Chinese officials on multiple occasions to recognize North Korean escapees as refugees. This would enable their safe passage to South Korea. His requests were denied, however.

As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, China is obligated under international law to not forcibly repatriate individuals with “a well-founded fear of being persecuted” upon return.²⁴ Despite

21 Government of the People's Republic of North Korea, “Democratic People's Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review On the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda,” https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf.

22 Kim Namseok, “A Resurgence of Democracy? A Conversation with Francis Fukuyama on the Challenges of a Changing Global Order,” trans. Raymond Ha, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, January 12, 2023, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/resurgence-democracy>.

23 “S. Korea Seeks Formal Consultations with U.S., EU on NK Human Rights,” *Yonhap News*, January 15, 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230115001200325>.

24 Roberta Cohen, “Legal Grounds for Protection of North Korean Refugees,” Brookings Institution, September 13, 2010, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/legal-grounds-for-protection-of-north-korean-refugees/>.

Highlighting China's complicity in human rights abuses in North Korea will draw diplomatic protests from Beijing, but it could be an effective strategy for Seoul to redirect Washington's attention to North Korea.

this obligation, China claims that North Korean escapees are economic migrants and continues to forcibly repatriate them. Traffickers in the Sino-North Korean border area abuse this fear of repatriation to coerce female North Korean escapees into forced marriages with Chinese men in rural villages, or to sell them into prostitution. Beijing has turned a blind eye to these criminal activities. In its 2022 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, the U.S. State Department classified both China and North Korea as Tier 3 countries. This means that they have failed to meet basic standards for combating human trafficking, and have not made meaningful efforts to improve their policies.²⁵

Highlighting China's complicity in human rights abuses in North Korea will draw diplomatic protests from Beijing, but it could be an effective strategy for Seoul to redirect Washington's attention to North Korea. Although the response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has taken up much of Washington's bandwidth, China remains at the top of the Biden administration's foreign policy agenda. In doing so, however, South Korea must take care to avoid politicizing the issue.

A KOREAN PROBLEM, NEGLECTED IN KOREA

During my time at UCLA in the mid-1990s, a friend put me in touch with the North American Coalition for Human Rights in Korea. This group had worked to promote human rights and democracy in South Korea for nearly two decades since 1975, at the height of the autocratic Yusin Era under Park Chung-Hee.²⁶ Now that South Korea had become a democracy, the group had decided to conclude its activities.

I was asked if I might be able to put their archive of internal documents to good use, and I immediately

agreed. As a Korean who had lived through this era, I felt a sense of responsibility to preserve these documents. Furthermore, as a researcher of social movements, I was excited by the prospect of obtaining these materials. The materials arrived in 34 large boxes, and I had the chance to view the contents of every box before the library staff began to organize them. Because of their historic importance, these materials were compiled into a special collection—the Archival Collection on Democracy and Unification in Korea. I have advised doctoral students who analyzed these materials in their dissertations.

As I sifted through the documents, I found letters that were sent to the White House, calling upon the United States to play its part in improving the human rights situation in South Korea. I came across crumpled pieces of paper that had been smuggled out of Gwangju in May 1980, with urgent handwritten notes that sought to tell the outside world about what was happening to the pro-democracy protests in that city. These were living, breathing documents that vividly told the story of South Korea's pro-democracy movement in the 1970s and 80s.

I am deeply ashamed to admit that I had been unaware until then of just how many Americans had worked tirelessly for the cause of human rights and democracy in South Korea. Many Koreans believed that the United States had unflinchingly supported South Korea's authoritarian governments, and I too had been influenced by that current of thought. In those boxes, I also discovered letters from pro-democracy activists in South Korea, expressing their gratitude for the support of American citizens and civic groups. It is perhaps the memories of reading such letters that heightened my discomfort and disappointment at witnessing how South Korea's progressives neglect North Korean human rights.

Last October, I met Rep. Chris Smith at a conference in Washington. He told me that if he had the opportunity to visit North Korea and meet Kim Jong-Un, he would not hesitate to bring up human rights. He also brought up human rights during a meeting with Premier Li Peng in Beijing, though he will no longer have the opportunity to do so, as Smith has been sanctioned by the Chinese government and barred from entering China ever again. I

25 U.S. Department of State, 2022 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

26 This era is named after the Yusin Constitution, which went into force in 1972 and codified authoritarian rule under Park Chung-Hee. It marked some of the most oppressive years of dictatorial rule in South Korea.

was deeply moved by his steadfast and sincere commitment to human rights.

There is much interest in North Korean human rights among college students in the United States. Student groups, including those at Stanford, hold regular events and conferences to raise awareness of what is happening in North Korea and to call for action. I have heard students ask why K-pop artists are silent on North Korean human rights, even as K-pop fans are raising their voices in support of causes like the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar. This is the unfortunate reality of North Korean human rights today. There is great concern and interest in the rest of the world, but it is politicized or ignored in South Korea.

A HISTORIC RESPONSIBILITY FOR KOREANS

In an essay comparing East Germany and North Korea that he contributed to the book *The North Korean Conundrum*, Sean King argues that South Korea should take a principled position even if policies to improve the human rights situation in North Korea are unlikely to achieve tangible results. “South Korea can nonetheless stand on principle so as to at least help make even a few North Koreans’ lives better,” he writes, “and to also lay down a marker for other governments as to how they should approach Pyongyang.” Moreover, “when reunification comes, hopefully under Seoul’s rule,” he stresses that “North Koreans will know that they were not forgotten when the country was divided.”²⁷

27 Sean King, “Germany’s Lessons for Korea,” in *The North Korean Conundrum: Balancing Human Rights and Nuclear Security*, eds. Robert R. King and Gi-Wook Shin (Stanford: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2022), 203.

28 “About the Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights” [in Korean], Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, <https://www.nkhr.or.kr/nkhr-소개/북한인권시민연합-소개/?ckattempt=1>.

Just as South Koreans expressed their gratitude to Americans who fought for their human rights, I have no doubt that the North Korean people feel the same way toward South Korea and the international community’s efforts to promote their human rights, even if they cannot—at present—write letters to the outside world. The late Reverend Yoon Hyun, who founded the Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights in 1996 after spending decades fighting for human rights and democracy in South Korea, said he was

driven by a haunting question. “What will we say when, after reunification, 200,000 political prisoners and their families ask us: what did you do as we were dying?”²⁸

As North Korea will likely continue its provocative missile launches, most attention will be focused on security issues. Nevertheless, the Yoon administration must persevere in its efforts to improve the human rights of the North Korean people, and the Democratic Party of Korea should not repeat its past mistakes by politicizing or neglecting the issue. North Korean human rights is more than just a political problem or a national security objective. The citizens of the Republic of Korea have a historic responsibility and a collective moral obligation to address the suffering of their brethren in the North.

Translated by Raymond Ha

THE WALTER H. SHORENSTEIN ASIA-PACIFIC RESEARCH CENTER

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