

“Critical Engagement”: British Policy toward the DPRK

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Researchers at the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center recently proposed that the ROK assume a “tailored engagement” policy with the DPRK. Although developed from a completely different perspective, the United Kingdom’s “critical engagement” policy has much in common with their approach. The UK’s policy toward the DPRK has been developed and applied for over fourteen years now.

BACKGROUND

The United Kingdom is not a direct participant in the Six-Party Talks, but as a prominent member of the international community, it maintains a strong interest in developments on the Korean Peninsula. Unlike the United States, Japan, and the ROK, its like-minded partners involved in the Six-Party Talks, the United Kingdom established diplomatic relations with

party line, confirming rather than narrowing the differences between the two sides. However, these actions remind the DPRK that these are issues that must be faced if it wants to be fully accepted by the rest of the international community. It also makes clear that progress on areas of concern is a fundamental condition if UK and EU engagement is to move to a higher level.

CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

At the same time, the United Kingdom also pursues other forms of engagement with the DPRK to try to increase the level of mutual understanding and hopefully reduce the level of disagreement between the two sides. Having a significant impact will only be possible in the longer term, and requires continued and consistent commitment. It is easier to build up this kind of exchange if efforts are focused on areas where the two sides see mutual benefit.

Education

The British Council English Teaching and Training Programme is the UK’s flagship project in the DPRK. From September 2000 onwards, with funding from

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the DPRK in 2000, and therefore has considerable experience engaging with the DPRK at the ground level in both the DPRK and London. The policy has been reviewed and refreshed since its introduction but has, by and large, remained consistent.

The United Kingdom shares the international community’s concerns about the DPRK’s continued nuclear and weapons of mass destruction development and its abysmal human rights situation. The United Kingdom raises these issues directly in both London and Pyongyang, but this seldom produces positive action. DPRK officials typically repeat the well-known

the Department for International Development, two British Council trainers started training North Korean English language teachers and directly teaching English to students at Kim Il Sung University and Pyongyang University for Foreign Studies. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office provided funds so that another trainer could start at Kim Hyong Jik University of Education in September 2001. In 2009, the program expanded further with the appointment of an in-country project leader to manage the project and provide training. This leader was also able to take advantage of additional opportunities that appeared in other educational institutions. So when students were taken

out of universities to work on construction projects in 2011–12, the project expanded to two additional universities, Kim Chaek University of Technology and Kim Chol Ju University of Education, as well as to Pyongyang No. 1 Middle School, and held the first regional workshop for North Korean English teachers. The project grew again in June 2014 with expansion to two more universities, Pyongyang University of Architecture and Han Dok Su Pyongyang University of Light Industry, and two additional foreign language schools, including Pyongyang Foreign Languages School at Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies.

As part of this project, a DPRK English language teachers delegation was sent to the United Kingdom for short training courses for several years, but around 2007 the course was cancelled at the last minute because of problems on the DPRK side. The UK side decided to use the funds that became available to arrange English language and culture courses for mid-level officials from the DPRK. Participants are mostly from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and include some academics, but members of the Ministry of Public Security and the Workers' Party of Korea have also joined. The courses focus on English training and visits to institutions, such as the Houses of Parliament and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and meetings with stakeholders, such as community police officers, magistrates, and the local and regional press, which together give participants a better idea about how UK systems work and help improve the working relationships with the DPRK.

Also on the educational side, since 2008, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office started to offer the DPRK two one-year scholarships under its Chevening scheme, which aims to fund one-year post-graduate courses in the United Kingdom for other countries' potential future leaders. In most countries, a large number of qualified candidates apply online and then go through a standard selection process to get funding for courses that they have already selected. This is not the case in the DPRK, where the scheme has to be publicized through direct embassy contacts and few, if any, of the candidates have the necessary English language qualifications or any idea of the courses that they can take in the United Kingdom. This means that the embassy must proactively recruit for candidates who then have to be trained for English language exams and, only if they get through these and their interviews successfully, must then find them places at universities. To add to the challenge, successful candidates

sometimes become ineligible at the last minute or have to withdraw, and because of these and other problems, only four of eight potential DPRK scholarships have been taken up so far.

From a slightly different angle, the United Kingdom has also financed some economics workshops for the DPRK through Chosun Exchange, a Singapore-based NGO. This is to give more people in the DPRK some understanding of how the international economic system works and the kind of standards that must be met by all countries internationally. These workshops have, so far, covered finance and special economic zones and been attended by officials and company employees.

Humanitarian

The British embassy is engaged in small-scale projects, mainly through European NGOs, to assist vulnerable groups. The projects will sometimes just be part of the general humanitarian effort to improve food security, which are now focused more on providing essential nutrition, and water and sanitation. For example, these projects may provide greenhouses and clean water supplies for orphanages or sanitary sewage systems for hospitals, offering a model for similar institutions to follow.

This kind of engagement has perhaps had most impact on the disabled, especially on their increasing participation in sporting events, including international ones. Initially, the embassy and other diplomatic missions provided basic equipment such as hand-propelled wheelchairs. In 2011, the embassy funded DPRK medical personnel to visit the United Kingdom to show how surgical treatment for spinal injuries, often the only treatment available in the DPRK, could be followed by rehabilitation. The embassy strongly encouraged the DPRK to send athletes to the 2012 London Paralympic Games and its funding enabled one swimmer to qualify for them. A year later, the embassy paid for a delegation, including a team of four athletes, to go to the Asian Disabled Youth Games in Malaysia. In 2014, it funded a mixed disabled/able-bodied sports event for children in central Pyongyang. The events were reported in the DPRK media. This effort coordinated through Handicapped International and the Korean Federation for the Protection of the Disabled has helped to make the disabled more visible and, hopefully, more accepted by society.

Culture

The DPRK has been relatively closed to cultural exchanges beyond those with socialist countries and a few international events. Knowledge of British culture seems to be mainly of classic novels, such as *Ivanhoe*, *Dombey and Son*, and *Vanity Fair*. The British embassy has tried to take advantage of this knowledge to increase links within the country and build a stronger understanding of modern Britain.

festival: *Fast Girls*, *Ping Pong*, *The Selfish Giant*, and *Philomena*. These were definitely not standard DPRK films and hopefully opened eyes to the wider world.

Although the embassy has not provided financial support, it has done what it can for other UK initiatives. It helped Koryo Tours when that private tourism organization took the DPRK 1966 soccer team back to the United Kingdom in 2001 for a nostalgic tour of the scene of their victories there, and the return visit by

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The British embassy in Pyongyang opened in 2001, and shortly after, provided books for a special UK section in the Grand People's Study House. The Study House is a library that also offers daily courses to those who are not in education full-time. The books cover a wide range of subjects from basic information about the UK to science and human rights. This year, these books have been supplemented with a large number of graded English language readers and another selection of textbooks on road safety, care for the disabled and elderly, economics, human rights and UK, EU, and U.S. politics.

Since its founding, the embassy has also tried to get modern British films shown at the biennial Pyongyang International Film Festival. It can take time and considerable effort to even be considered for the festival. The DPRK Festival Committee must be provided with the films so it can submit them to "relevant organizations" for clearance. When the committee eventually replies to the embassy with a list of approved films, the embassy then has to contact distributors and persuade them to allow their films to be shown without the financial return that is a common expectation from showings in most other countries. The embassy has had some success, with films such as *Mr. Bean*, *Wallace and Grommit*, and *Bend It Like Beckham*. This last film was also shown on DPRK television on the tenth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations in 2010. However, in 2012, the Committee only received clearance for one episode of three *Sherlock Homes* episodes; no films were approved. The year 2014 was better, partly because the British Council concluded a cultural agreement with the DPRK's Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries in June. Four British films were provided through the council and embassy and shown at the

Middlesbrough Ladies' Football Team to the DPRK in 2010. Koryo Tours has played a useful role in promoting exchanges and introducing the DPRK to a range of sports not normally played there, from cricket to Ultimate Frisbee. On the inward visit side, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office tried to help soprano Suzannah Clarke, who performed several times in Pyongyang, to have the DPRK Philharmonic Orchestra visit the United Kingdom, but lack of funds ultimately made this impossible.

Human Rights and Security

The embassy funds annual visits to the United Kingdom by relevant DPRK Foreign Ministry staff and has also helped arrange visits by Workers' Party of Korea delegations. During these visits, Foreign and Commonwealth Office staff has obviously raised the nuclear and human rights issues, as have others whom the DPRK delegations have met with. The last Foreign Ministry delegation visited a correctional facility and a special needs school near London as part of their programme.

The embassy in Pyongyang did have some success with direct engagement on human rights soon after it opened. A small number of DPRK officials went on a customized human rights course at Essex University. When a Foreign Office minister — the only one so far — visited Pyongyang in 2004, he was accompanied by the head of the Human Rights Department. The DPRK offered a further human rights visit, although this and most of the direct dialogue on human rights stopped soon after the EU sponsored the first DPRK UN human rights resolution in 2003.

Impact

The United Kingdom's efforts are not going to have the immediate result we all want. However, they do show that the DPRK is not completely isolated from the Western world and that it is possible to carry out engagement and hopefully reduce the chasm between DPRK thinking and the rest of the world. These exchanges are not easy to arrange. They carry a range of political and administrative barriers that must be overcome on both sides. They have to be in areas that the DPRK is willing to accept, but will, at the same time, not cut across regional allies' policies or contribute to the strengthening of the DPRK regime. The relatively small amount of money available also limits the scale of projects that can be pursued, although small projects can have a great impact on those who are receptive to their messages.

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NOTES

1. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the FCO/HMG or the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center.