



Remarks to the Asia Society

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Thank you Jamie for that introduction. I also want to thank the organizers of today's important conference, the Asia Society, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and Refugees International. And I want to acknowledge a few individuals who are here today, Ambassador Chung of South Korea, Ambassador Fumiko Saiga of Japan, Evans Revere, Senior State Department Official on special assignment to the Council on Foreign Relations and David Hawk of the Religious Freedom Commission:

I am pleased to be here with the Asia Society and I am grateful that you have focused today's discussions on "Placing Human Rights on the Security Agenda," especially as it relates to North Korea, which is the primary focus of my work as Special Envoy.

Introduction

The issue of North Korea's human rights record, and the appropriate international response to it, is a difficult challenge for free world, and one that recent events have forced onto the front pages of the world's media. Last month, in a one-on-one meeting between President Bush and Chinese President Hu Jintao, the President expressed his concern about China's treatment of North Korean refugees. Just four weeks earlier, the White House expressed our grave concern with China's treatment of a North Korean refugee -- Kim Chun-Hee. She had sought refuge in a Korean school in Beijing only to be returned forcibly to North Korea by the Chinese despite being implored by other governments and the UN to protect her. Today, her whereabouts, and even whether she is alive, are unknown.

The week after President Hu's visit, President Bush met with defectors from North Korea and a Japanese family whose daughter the North Koreans abducted. It was one of the most moving meetings I have attended. Sitting next to the President on one of the large chairs in the Oval Office was a six-year old girl, Kim Han-Mee, whose parents fled from North Korea in 1999 and then lived clandestinely in China until 2002. When they originally crossed the Tumen River to China, Han-Mee's mother was five months pregnant with her. Unable to feed Han-Mee, her mother faced the choice of selling her or working in a brothel. The family was caught by the Chinese authorities and forced back to North Korea. Han-Mee's father feared execution and escaped from a prison camp. The family then fled again to China only to be captured in an attempt to seek refuge at a foreign consulate in China. Luckily, human rights groups were able to secure the family's release and resettlement in South Korea.

A week after that meeting, I participated in another extraordinary encounter. I met with the first six North Koreans to be granted refugee in the United States since the current humanitarian crisis began in the 1990s.

Among this group, one twenty-year woman named Chanmi Shin told of how she escaped to China, where, forced to live underground, she was sold into marriages, repeatedly raped and forcibly returned to North Korea. She then witnessed mass starvation, torture and abuse of repatriated refugees, including her own brother, before escaping again. Her thirty-one year old brother, Joseph, told me of being tortured after being returned from China, where he had sought food for his starving family. He was beaten and electrocuted by Chinese officials, then sent to a North Korean facility where he had his fingers broken, lived in filth that included maggots crawling on his broken skin, and had to endure solitary confinement in a box that was only about a cubic meter in size. Despite these travails, and emotional scars that may never heal, these brave individuals all exhibited a spark of life that reminds us that the human spirit can never be defeated fully. They each conveyed to me their immense gratitude to the United States for our concern with their plight and our efforts to secure their safety and freedom.

Policy Rationale

Why is the United States focusing so much attention on North Korean human rights? Why did Congress unanimously pass a law in 2004 saying that the U.S. should play a leadership role in formulating international solutions to this profound humanitarian dilemma? The answer is that is that the Congress, and this President, strongly believe it is in the interest of the U.S. and the free world to encourage democracy and respect for human rights in North Korea. According to the State Department's recent annual human rights report, North Korea executes political prisoners and some repatriated refugees, performs forced abortions and commits infanticide, suppresses religious freedom, engages in routine and severe torture and operates a network of prison camps where conditions are extremely harsh and many prisoners are not expected to survive.

It is simply inconceivable that a country whose leaders are chosen by its people, and who respect the dignity of the individual would treat its own citizens in this manner. Nor does the North Korean regime only endanger its own people through its barbaric actions. The logical outgrowth of a nation that does not respect the rights of its citizens is a nation that does not respect the rights of its neighbors. Indeed, North Korea threatens other nations including our own by building a nuclear arsenal and trafficking drugs and human beings. It repeatedly has cited conditions under which it will turn other lands and peoples into a "sea of fire." And is the first government since the Third Reich to counterfeit U.S. currency.

Government conduct at home naturally influences conduct toward other nations. The 20th century shows us numerous examples of this correlation. With Hitler, Stalin, Mao and others, the march of tyranny at home was an antecedent to international aggression. For this reason, making human rights part of our national security agenda is not only an appropriate policy, but also a necessary one.

Refuting Opponents

There are some who question this approach. Some argue that our concern about human freedom amounts to interference in internal affairs of another state -- a sort of new imperialism. In other words, what happens in North Korea stays in North Korea. Others do not protest raising the human rights issue, but believe this is a matter solely to be worked out between North and South Korea. Finally, some recognize that human rights is a legitimate area of concern, but argue that raising it will prevent us from making progress on more immediate security concerns like North Korea's nuclear arsenal.

First, as to the claim that we are improperly interfering in the internal matters of another state, we must note that in founding the United Nations, and certainly in adopting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the international community discarded any notion that a country is above reproach for what happens within its borders.

If you have examined atrocities like the Ukraine Famine and killing fields of Cambodia and ever vowed that they should never be allowed to happen again, then you necessarily reject this notion that a dictator is free to do what he likes with his own people. If we do not call human rights abusers to account when we identify them, does our silence not invite further atrocities? With North Korea, we cannot afford inaction that will allow millions more to suffer and even die. Instead of lamenting their loss a decade from now in a film called *Hotel Pyongyang*, the international community should take action while there is still time.

The second critique accepts that discussion of human rights issues is legitimate, but asserts that this is an issue to be worked out exclusively by North and South Korea. Here too, we must reject this notion. Would anyone have seriously argued that people being shot for trying to flee former East Germany was an issue solely for the West

Germans to address? Was that not an issue that had the potential to affect a number of other countries, and thus justify their concern and involvement?

Events in Korea have an impact on the U.S. and our partners in Asia. Our interests there run deep. South Korea is a great friend of the United States, a close strategic ally, and our 7th-largest trading partner. We are in the process of negotiating a free trade agreement. Furthermore, we have agreed to work together on security issues pertaining to the whole peninsula, and we are committed to South Korea's defense. We cannot simply turn the oversight of our interests over to another nation, and neither can the other countries of northeast Asia.

Finally, there is the argument that focusing on human rights will forestall an agreement that alleviates more immediate security concerns. In the case of North Korea, some urge us to focus only on the nuclear issue, and that any serious mention of human rights will distract the parties involved from reaching an agreement. But the facts prove just the opposite. Indeed, after a significant lapse in the Six Party Talks, the North Koreans announced that they were willing to resume discussions only four days after President Bush met in June of 2005 with Kang Chul-Hwan, a prominent North Korean defector. I would suggest that highlighting human rights, rather than stopping the progression of security talks, reinforced for the North Koreans the United States' commitment to continuing to spotlight the regime's abuses, and made clear that only by returning to the table would the North Koreans have a chance at international legitimacy.

History has shown that there is nothing contradictory or incoherent with an approach that has as one of its components a discussion of human rights. Speaking with clarity on this issue does not prevent or even discourage progress on immediate security concerns.

Consider the Helsinki Final Act, an agreement signed by 35 governments in 1975, at the crossroads of the standoff between the United States and the former Soviet Union. Helsinki placed issues in three primary baskets: political-military, economic, and human rights -- human rights and security issues were linked. Initially the third basket did not receive much attention. But it would play a decisive role in opening up the Soviet Union and its client regimes. Exchanges of people, high-level visits, and the support to those who wished to emigrate exposed the pretensions of the authoritarians to the world. Furthermore, the third basket actually supported dissent more directly by creating committees in each state that monitored progress toward Helsinki goals.

There are key differences between conditions that led to Helsinki and the situation today on the Korean Peninsula. The Soviet Union had significant trade with the rest of the world and it was viewed as beneficial to all parties that this be expanded. There also was a pre-existing diplomatic relationship among the parties. These conditions and incentives are not all present in case of North Korea, but the accord nonetheless shows that we can address security and human rights at the same time. As Scoop Jackson -- patron of freedom in the last century -- often said, "if you believe in the cause of freedom, then proclaim it, live it and protect it, for humanity's future depends upon it."

Challenges We Face

Although the United States has a strong interest in human rights conditions in North Korea, the nations that have the greatest stake in the future of North Korea, and those with the greatest opportunity to effect changes in the regime, are North Korea's neighbors. In addition to speaking clearly about the North Korean regime, it is important that nations make sure that their conduct is not counterproductive. For example, humanitarian aid needs to be delivered to the people of North Korea in a manner that is carefully calibrated to achieve the goal of helping those in need. Since 1995, the United States has provided more than 2 million tons of humanitarian food assistance to the people of North Korea, primarily through the World Food Program. We are proud of our efforts to alleviate their suffering. But the North Korean government has proved itself highly adept at diverting foreign assistance for its own political and military purposes, which include depriving those out of favor of food. It is in the interest of all nations that seek an improvement in the lives of North Koreans to insist that such assistance will be provided only if there are reasonable and verifiable assurances and controls in place to monitor distribution and ensure it achieves its intended purpose.

There is also the question of economic aid to the North. South Korea, which has undergone its own remarkable transition to a free market democracy in the last generation, has been trying to integrate the North with the South economically, with the hope that South Korean financial assistance and investment in the North will moderate the North's policies. We have some concerns about projects related to this like the Kaesong Industrial Complex. I have been invited by the South Korean Unification Ministry to go to Kaesong to look at this project, and I am hopeful that I will find that international standards for labor rights are being observed at this facility. If that is the case, then perhaps a genuine opening might result from a project that is injecting hundreds of millions of dollars of capital into the North.

China also has an important role to play. As North Korea's largest benefactor and largest trading partner, and a nation with rapidly growing economic might, China is the dominant player in the region. A major concern today is China's refusal to treat refugees humanely and in a manner consistent with a treaty that both China and the United States have ratified--the 1967 Protocol to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. By forcibly returning refugees to North Korea, the Chinese are not only putting them at grave risk, but also violating a binding international agreement. This agreement contains a clause for arbitration in the case of non-compliance -- something that may need to be considered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees absent improvement by China.

Another key player is Japan. As a democracy and very close ally, Japan is a primary partner in our dealings with East Asia, including North Korea. The abduction of citizens by agents of foreign government is a vile act of state sponsored terrorism and perhaps the most flagrant example of North Korea's lawlessness. I am pleased that we are joined here by Ambassador Saiga, Japan's envoy for human rights in North Korea, with whom I have begun to work on these issues. I encourage Japan to join us in expressing concern for the broader spectrum of human rights issues related to North Korea, so that we can work both to reunite families whose loved ones have been abducted, and also to improve the lives of the North Korean people.

Next Steps

In the months ahead, we will work to advance the cause of freedom for all Koreans by pressing for more international attention to this issue. We are now looking toward the UN General Assembly this fall with the expectation that there will be another favorable resolution in the Third Committee about North Korean human rights violations. Europe in the past has shown strong leadership on this issue, and we will work with our allies there to enlist other democracies around the world. Last year, the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva voted 30-9 in favor of a resolution criticizing human rights violations in North Korea. And this was followed last fall at the UN General Assembly with a similar resolution that passed overwhelmingly by a vote of 88 to 21. We are hopeful that the Republic of Korea will join in this growing international consensus the next time the UN considers this issue.

We also will seek to increase the flow of information going into North Korea. This will pierce the veil of darkness and deception that Kim Jung Il has drawn over North Korea. His government attempts to control all information in the country. Through this censorship, the regime attempts to convince his people that they live in socialist paradise, and the world outside is hostile and barbaric. Defectors have told me how receiving factual information from abroad stirred in them an awakening that the propaganda wasn't true. When the President met with North Korean defectors, we heard from a former North Korean soldier who was able to listen clandestinely to broadcasts from South Korea due to his position. He said this was the key factor in his decision to escape from North Korea. Through enhanced radio broadcasting and other forms of information dissemination, we will seek the lift the blockade on information that the government has imposed on its people.

And of course, we will continue to try to protect those brave North Koreans who wish to emigrate and who have defected. The famine in North Korea in the 1990s sparked a refugee exodus into China and other countries. Estimates of the numbers of refugees who have yet to be resettled range from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands. South Korea has welcomed approximately 8,000 refugees in recent years, including 1,400 last year alone. This is a very productive step. We expect most North Koreans who escape will opt to go there, where they share a common heritage and language, as well as family ties. But America will do its part to alleviate this humanitarian catastrophe, and we welcome the involvement of other nations that are in a position to help.

Fundamentally, the United States will pursue a policy that has freedom and respect for the individual as its cornerstone. The promotion of human rights is certainly an important end in and of itself, and therefore a clear objective of our policy. But it is also a critical means to an even broader end -- America's effort to extend freedom and security across the globe.

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