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Human Rights are Critical to North Korean Policy Agenda

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Author: [Terrence Matsuo](#)

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Earlier this month, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights released [another report](#) detailing the dire human rights situation in North Korea. Echoing earlier pronouncements, UN investigators cited escapee testimony to say that “there are reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity have been committed and may be ongoing in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.” In a statement released

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with the report, High Commissioner Michele Bachelet strongly criticized North Korea for its human rights abuses. "I urge the international community to prioritize justice and to take immediate steps to prevent further infliction of serious human rights violations against the people of the DPRK," she said.

Experts say that granting international humanitarian organizations access to the camps should be the starting point for Pyongyang taking steps to address international concerns about its human rights record. "I've always thought that the United Nations should be asking for access to the most vulnerable populations; that's the UN's technical mandate," observed Olivia Enos, a senior policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation. Allowing in personnel from the World Food Programme, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and other such organizations "might be good low hanging fruit efforts," she said in a telephone interview.

Transparency in aid programs would be another key feature of North Korean progress in this area. Greg Scarlatoiu, executive director of The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, added that such action would be helpful to building trust between Pyongyang and the international community, including Washington. Letting international aid workers conduct project monitoring and evaluation, and work with North Koreans on the ground have all been done successfully in the past, he observed. "If the regime displayed intent to address its human rights issues, I think that could create a lot of goodwill toward engagement," said Director Scarlatoiu.

In the very least, he also said that just admitting the camps existed would be progress on this issue. Despite documented evidence, like witness testimony and satellite imagery, "they continue to adamantly deny the existence of these detention facilities," said Director Scarlatoiu.

But other experts are skeptical that North Korea would ever budge on something so critical to the central government. "The entire regime is built on a system that relies on denying the human rights of the Korean people in the north in order for the regime to survive," said Col. David Maxwell, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. "North Korea changing their human rights situation would be a wonderful thing for negotiations and relations," he added. "I just don't think it's possible."

When it comes to North Korea, policymakers and analysts have often portrayed reducing
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its military threat as competing with addressing its human rights record. "We see this repeated tendency to sacrifice human rights on the altar of talks on nukes and missiles," said Director Scarlatoiu. "We've been doing this for almost thirty years now, perhaps it's time for a different approach," he added.

Indeed, there are growing calls for an approach to North Korea that integrates human rights concerns with security ones. Writing for the George W. Bush Presidential Center, Dr. Victor Cha and Lindsay Lloyd observe in a recently published report that previous administration notably left human rights off the agenda as it engaged in three summits between President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un. "There is zero evidence that avoiding human rights helped the negotiations in any way," they write. "Indeed, despite these summits, the United States is no closer to a denuclearization agreement."

Senior Biden administration have said that human rights concerns will be integral to its foreign policy. The State Department has also announced that it is currently conducting a review of North Korea policy. "Our focus in formulating this new policy and approach...will be on reducing the threat to the United States and our allies, as well as improving the lives of the North the South Korean people," said Spokesman Ned Price at a press briefing.

Personnel announcements also indicate how important the administration sees human rights. Dr. Jung Pak, a noted Korea watcher from the Brookings Institution, has been appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. In addition to her career in the American intelligence community, she is also the author of a well-received biography of the North Korean leader. "If you read her book, she's unequivocal about the connection between these human rights violations and the security concerns emanating from North Korea," said Ms. Enos. "I think that there are officials in the Biden administration who think that human rights issues shouldn't be left off the negotiating table," she added.

As the Biden administration conducts it policy review, attention is focusing on the position of Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights. The Biden administration is expected to fill that position, after being left vacant during the previous administration. Although no candidates have been announced, Ms. Enos said that the envoy will be expected to work with colleagues across a host of departments and agencies in Washington in order to coordinate "multi-pronged and comprehensive responses to North Korea, one that plugs into the work that's already being done by the broader national security apparatus in the US government"

Coordinating with actors outside the U.S. will also be an important function of the special envoy. But recent events suggest that there will be some difficulties in driving cooperation between Washington and Seoul. Last month, South Korea declined to support a UN General Assembly resolution criticizing North Korea for its human rights violations, and

implemented a ban on leaflets launched into North Korea. South Korea's softening stance on its northern brother suggests there is a disconnect between the Blue and White Houses.

"We could learn how to have multiple approaches from the South and from the U.S. that... may seem publicly at odds, but are based on deep trust and communication between the two governments," said Col. Maxwell. But he notes that North Korea has long sought to split the alliance between the U.S. and South Korea, meaning that it is imperative Washington and Seoul present a unified front. Without it, "that is how you damage the alliance, and it plays right into Kim Jong-un's hands," he said.

Despite these challenges, the U.S. must prioritize human rights along with security concerns in its foreign policy towards North Korea. "We are dealing with a regime that commits crimes against humanity," said Director Scarlatoiu. "There's a very high moral, political, ethical hazard associated with entering any kind of deal the regime in the absence of any move in the right direction on the human rights front."

As with most issues related to the North, quick solutions have eluded successive American and South Korean governments. "Rome was not built in a day, and Pyongyang is not going to dismantle its nuclear weapons or its political prison camps in a day," says Ms. Enos. But this should not discourage us from looking for areas where progress might be made. "We might take some of these smaller trust-building measures where transparency is promoted that could result in change," she said.

Terrence Matsuo is a Contributing Author at the Korea Economic Institute of America and the program assistant for the Policy and Diplomacy practice at McColm & Company. The opinions expressed in this article are his own and do not necessarily represent the views of McCO.

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