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Climate Change as a Path to Engagement with North Korea

The United States, South Korea and the international community could start by providing support for reforestation in North Korea.

Monday, March 11, 2024 / **By:** Troy Stangarone

This essay is part of a series, Pursuing Peaceful Coexistence with North Korea, that explores how the United States and South Korea can peacefully coexist with a nuclear North Korea.

Since North Korea broke off talks with the United States after their 2019 meeting in Stockholm, progress in engaging Pyongyang on its nuclear weapons and other issues has stalled. The pandemic likely played a significant role in cooling engagement, but Pyongyang's growing relationship with Russia has further reduced its incentives to engage with the United States.



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has described the effort to address the problem of deforestation in his country as “a war to improve nature.” (Doug Mills/The New York Times)

While policymakers may be reluctant to engage North Korea on nonnuclear topics for fear of being accused of appeasing or helping to sustain the regime in Pyongyang, polling suggests that the U.S. public is open to engaging North Korea on nonnuclear issues. In a survey conducted by YouGov that I oversaw for the Korea Economic Institute, 50 percent of Americans polled said that the United States should talk to North Korea about nonnuclear issues even if Pyongyang refuses to give up its nuclear weapons. This includes 53 percent of Democrats, 47 percent of Republicans and 51 percent of independents.

At the same time, it is unclear if international pressure can move the North Korean regime. The strict border measures that North Korea put in place during the pandemic, along with the regime’s high level of illicit income-generating activities, suggest that it has adapted to pressure. Also, with Russia vetoing additional sanctions against North Korea at the United Nations Security Council and violating existing sanctions by supplying needed goods to North Korea in exchange for arms, continued pressure may have less impact on the regime than prior to the pandemic. If that is the case, it would benefit the United States, South Korea and others to explore new ways of engaging the regime within the existing sanctions regime. Cooperation on climate change, specifically on projects related to reforestation and mitigation, is one area where the United States and North Korea have mutual interest that could provide a pathway for engagement.

Reforestation in North Korea

During the North Korean famine of the 1990s, the collapse of the public food distribution system accelerated deforestation in the country. Desperate North Koreans cut down trees, even on mountainsides, to make space for cultivable land and for fuel. Estimates of the overall losses of forest cover vary, but there is agreement by North Koreans and outside experts that North Korea has undergone a significant level of deforestation since the 1990s.

Addressing this challenge has been a point of emphasis under Kim Jong Un. He has referred to this effort as “a war to improve nature,” and shortly after he came to power, the regime took an initial step, ordering residents not to reclaim land on slopes of more than 15 degrees to prevent landslides and erosion. In 2015, Pyongyang put in place a plan to reforest North Korea over 10 years, while Kim, in his New Year’s address, stated: “We must carry out a strong battle in reforestation so that the mountains’ green forests turn into lush mountains of gold.” In a speech later that year, Kim noted that deforestation has increased North Korea’s susceptibility to flooding, mudslides and soil erosion, which all have a negative impact on the economy. It is one of the few times the regime has acknowledged economic challenges beyond the context of outside forces.

In subsequent years, North Korea has made some progress on reforestation. After declining by an annual average of 0.8 percent from 2001 to 2015, forest coverage in North Korea increased by 0.2 percent per year through 2019. As of 2019, forest coverage had been restored to 45 percent of North Korea’s surface, though much of the effort has been near major cities such as Pyongyang and Kaesong, along with tourist areas.

North Korea’s Interest in Climate Change

Climate change is one of the few areas where North Korea proactively engages the international community. It is a member of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and in its 2016 Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) at the Paris climate talks, Pyongyang said: “Integrating climate change considerations into relevant socio-economic development strategies and plans is considered as one of the important measures to ensure the sustainable development in DPR Korea.”

North Korea committed to reducing emissions by 8 percent by 2030 and up to 40.25 percent with international support in its initial NDC in 2016. In a 2019 update to that commitment, North Korea increased the goal for its own reductions by 16.4 percent over the same time period. But in a 2021 update to its U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Pyongyang lowered its domestic goal to a 15.63 percent cut and 50.34 percent cut if international assistance is provided.

North Korea indicated in its 2016 NDC that it planned to achieve its goals through the management and development of forests in a sustainable manner, along with an increase in renewable energy, improved climate and environmental laws, and enhanced cooperation with the international community. The 2019 update emphasized a significant push for forest restoration and, again, a turn to clean energy technologies, while the 2021 U.N. SDGs report notes that Pyongyang's greenhouse gas emissions reductions are reflected in its National Forestation Strategy (2015-2044).

While North Korea's own track record raises concerns regarding follow-through, the UNFCCC annual Conference of the Parties (COP) is one of the few high-level international conferences in which Pyongyang regularly participates. At COP 27, North Korea released a statement calling for developed countries to fulfill their responsibilities in addressing climate change and for practical and concrete measures to be taken to address the issue. While this is largely in line with other developing countries, Pyongyang likely has its own practical, domestic reasons for wanting to see progress on climate change.

The U.S. intelligence community has identified North Korea as one of 11 countries most vulnerable to climate change, a vulnerability Pyongyang acknowledges. North Korea's initial NDC estimates that the average temperature in the North will rise by 2.8 to 4.7 degrees Celsius over this century compared to the last three decades of the 20th century. Rising seas are estimated to result in the loss of 67 to 89 meters of North Korea's east coast, while the west coast is expected to see coastal erosion between 670 and 890 meters by the end of the century. More directly of concern, flooding is expected to be more severe in the rainy season and droughts more severe in the spring. Both will contribute to flooding, land loss and potentially decreased agricultural production, which are already significant problems today.

Practical Projects for Engaging North Korea on Climate Change

North Korea's own domestic needs and its willingness to engage on climate change internationally create potential areas for engagement on climate change through U.N. climate credits, specifically carbon dioxide removal credits.

At COP26, countries agreed to a rulebook for Article 6.2 carbon credits from the Paris Climate Accord. To qualify under Article 6.2, any credits would need to result in the removal or reduction of emissions, be permanent projects that would not occur without outside funding and utilize a conservative baseline to measure the emissions reductions. At COP27, new language was added to Article 6.4 to allow for mitigation contribution carbon credits. This change addresses long-standing concerns about double counting of emissions reductions in voluntary carbon markets by companies purchasing carbon credits. It allows purchasers to claim a contribution to helping a country achieve a domestic target without claiming to offset their own emissions. This change opens the door for potential private sector engagement in climate change projects in North Korea should the security and sanctions situation change in the future.

With North Korea already focused on reforestation, carbon credits could be a tool for engaging North Korea on climate change while encouraging sustainable change in North Korea in relation to forest preservation. North Korea also has prior experience in utilizing U.N. carbon credits and has previously received funding from the U.N.'s clean development mechanism, a carbon offset program.

South Korea is also a good partner for engagement with North Korea on reforestation. Not only does Seoul have a strong record on reforestation itself, but at COP26 South Korea included cooperation on reforestation in third countries, including North Korea, as one of the means through which it expected to achieve 5 percent of its emissions reductions by 2030. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's administration has maintained South Korea's willingness to cooperate with North Korea on forestry issues.

How Would Cooperation Work in Practice?

South Korea, the United States and other interested countries would provide support for reforestation in North Korea, including technical expertise, the transfer of saplings and other supplies needed for reforestation. The parties would need to seek an exemption from the 1718 Committee — the committee was set up in 2006 to oversee sanctions measures imposed by the U.N. Security Council on North Korea — for any necessary financial transfers and for North Korea to collect revenue from the carbon credits that the governments involved would commit to purchase as long as North Korea maintained a certain level of forest cover. Some of this could be mitigated if funds from any carbon credits were provided through barter rather than financial transfers. The program would use satellite monitoring of forests to ensure compliance by North Korea.

Earnings from any carbon credits could be disbursed to North Korea through the Green Climate Fund. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Pyongyang approached the fund about training and capacity building for accessing climate finance to support other projects under North Korea's NDC, such as "agriculture, forestry, energy, waste management and disaster risk management."

If cooperation on reforestation is successful, the United States, South Korea and the international community should consider other climate-related projects. Wind power is another potential area of cooperation, though more complex from the perspective of existing sanctions due to the need for investment in physical infrastructure. Kim has previously called for North Korean energy independence and the development of North Korea's offshore wind resources is one area where North and South Korea could share the benefits of cooperation. North Korea's 2016 NDC calls for the construction of 500 megawatts of offshore wind farms in the West Sea/Yellow Sea. In addition to the West Sea/Yellow Sea, a global estimate by the International Atomic Energy Agency suggests that North Korea also has significant potential

for offshore wind power in the East Sea/Sea of Japan. Similar to Pyongyang's arrangement with Beijing to provide China with hydroelectric power, a percentage of the wind power could be routed to South Korea allowing both countries to benefit.

After an initial flurry of activity under the Trump administration, engagement with North Korea has stalled. With the incentives for North Korea to return to talks diminishing with Russia's embrace of North Korea as an arms supplier, it will be important for Washington, Seoul and others to find ways to engage Pyongyang. Climate change, and specifically the issue of reforestation, may be one area where the interests of all three countries align and potential progress could be made.

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By: Adam Mount

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By: Lauren Sukin

Last September, North Korea's supreme leader, Kim Jong Un, traveled through Russia's Far East, where he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss munition sales in return for collaboration on space and other military technology. While Kim was outside of North Korea, Pyongyang test launched a ballistic missile in a move that is becoming quotidian. Although the test was one of dozens that have happened just in the past year, it was the first such test to occur while North Korea's supreme leader was out of the country.

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Seventy years after the end of the Korean War, there are still more than 7,000 U.S. servicemen who remain missing in action from that conflict. The remains of some 5,200 of these men are believed to be in North Korea. Unfortunately, poor diplomatic relations between the United States and North Korea have prevented the recovery of these remains. There is, therefore, a need for an alternative to the usual paradigm for conceiving, planning and implementing the recovery of U.S. war dead from North Korea. Usual practices might not carry the task, and ignoring the responsibility to bring our missing servicemen home should not be an option.

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