



THE PENINSULA

What a Newly Reorganized State Department Could Mean for North Korean Human Rights

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On April 22, Secretary of State Marco Rubio unveiled an organization chart and released an [official statement](#) that journalists described as a “sweeping plan” to restructure the Department of State. Reflecting the hyperbolic rhetoric of the second Donald Trump administration, the statement said, “In its current form, the department is bloated, bureaucratic and unable to perform its essential diplomatic mission in this new era of great power competition.” The proposed changes would eliminate ingrained “radical political ideology.”

The new organizational changes involve consolidating 734 bureaus and offices to 602, with some offices shifted among the department's bureaus to “increase efficiency.” A State Department spokesperson said that the “sweeping changes will empower our talented diplomats” but would not result in the immediate dismissal of personnel—though it is clear that the number of employees in the State Department will decrease. Rather than bolting the doors and removing the agency's nameplate from its building, as was done at USAID, the State Department may make personnel changes more gradually and reduce staff through natural attrition.

Despite the flamboyant rhetoric, Rubio was more deliberate and careful than some of his cabinet colleagues in making changes at his department. *The New York Times* [reported](#) that at a March 6 cabinet meeting, Elon Musk personally attacked Rubio for moving too slowly in reorganizing the State Department. “You have fired nobody,” Musk told Rubio, adding that the only person Rubio had fired was one of Musk's DOGE staffers. As the Rubio-Musk exchange continued, other senior government officials in the cabinet meeting

became increasingly uncomfortable. Trump finally stepped in. He made it clear that he supported Musk and the DOGE team's efforts, but he also called for DOGE to take a more "refined" approach.

The differences between Rubio and Musk, which became clear in the cabinet meeting, may well have been the result of the USAID shutdown. Legislation creating the aid agency specifies that it operates under the guidance of the secretary of state, but Musk and his DOGE crew largely eliminated USAID, apparently without initially involving the secretary of state. Now that the organization has been shuttered, Rubio is the head of what is left of USAID.

It is noteworthy that Rubio announced his initial reorganization plan for the State Department on April 22. This was the same day that Musk announced he would step back from his role in reorganizing the U.S. government and devote more time to Tesla after the company reported a 71 percent plunge in corporate profits during the first quarter of 2025, which began at the time Musk started dismantling government agencies with Trump's approval following the inauguration.

The Many Hats of Marco Rubio

The State Department's reorganization may be a priority for the new secretary of state, but Rubio has significant challenges because of his other responsibilities. Rubio was recently named acting national security advisor to Trump. In addition to those two more-than-full-time jobs, he is also acting administrator of USAID and acting archivist of the United States, the head of the National Archives and Record Administration.

Rubio has emerged as something of an anomaly among the fifteen members of Trump's cabinet. Rubio was one of the few cabinet members who was a member of Congress and the only senior Trump official who was nominated while serving in the U.S. Senate. He was the first member of the cabinet confirmed by the Senate, and the vote to confirm him came on January 20, a couple of hours after Trump was sworn in as president. The vote to confirm was 99-0. (Rubio voted for himself, but one Senate seat was vacant.) The other fourteen members of Trump's cabinet were confirmed by much smaller margins. Six were confirmed with fifty-five or fewer votes, and Pete Hegseth's nomination to serve as secretary of defense resulted in a 50-50 tie in the Senate, with Vice President JD Vance casting the tie-breaking vote.

In addition, Rubio has been appointed to serve temporarily but concurrently in three other federal positions. On February 3, he was appointed by Trump as acting administrator of USAID, which is being dismantled by Elon Musk and his DOGE crew. The secretary of state has a special connection with USAID to ensure that assistance programs are consistent with U.S. foreign policy, but the secretary has never had direct responsibility for the operations of the agency.

Less than two weeks after becoming acting administrator of USAID, Trump named Rubio acting archivist of the United States, the federal government official responsible for collecting, maintaining, and granting access to all federal records. The National Archives invoked FBI assistance in 2022 to reclaim official U.S. government documents that Trump illegally took to Mar-a-Lago. Trump was furious and said he would fire the head of the National Archives even before he was back in the Oval Office. When Trump fired the archivist, he appointed Rubio as acting head of the agency.

Rubio's latest post came just a few days ago when Trump was forced to remove Michael Waltz as his National Security Advisor because of the growing blowback from Waltz mistakenly sending highly classified information to a journalist. The national security advisor is a confidential advisor to the president and, as such, does not require Senate confirmation. Trump named Rubio as acting national security advisor. The term "acting" suggests that the appointment is temporary. Although such "dual-hatting" occurred when Henry Kissinger, President Richard Nixon's national security advisor, was also appointed secretary of state. That appointment came when Kissinger had already served four-and-a-half years as national security advisor. Rubio has been in office for four months, though he has a strong background in foreign affairs from his fourteen years in the U.S. Senate. Acting head of the National Archives and USAID are not positions that will require a heavy investment of Rubio's time, but national security advisor and secretary of state are each more than a full-time job.

Rubio's State Department Reorganization and North Korean Human Rights

A critical question that deserves attention, particularly in light of international unease with the new focus of U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration, is what Rubio might do in regard to human rights in North Korea. What impact will the restructuring of the State Department and the other chaotic changes taking place under Rubio have on U.S. policy on North Korea and particularly human rights? It is not yet clear how or if Rubio's revamped State Department will improve or limit efforts to address North Korea's well-documented human rights abuses, including whether a new U.S. special envoy for North Korean human rights will be appointed to lead that effort.

On February 4, two weeks after returning to the White House, Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from participation in the UN Human Rights Council, the UN body that has been the leading forum in publicizing North Korea's human rights abuses and urging international action. The council deals with human rights issues in many other countries around the world. During Trump's first presidential term, he ordered the U.S. withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council a year and a half after he assumed the presidency. Biden reversed that decision shortly after he took over the Oval Office in early 2021, and the United States actively participated in the Human Rights Council from 2021 to February 2025. When Trump returned to the Oval Office in January 2025, it took him just two weeks to order the U.S. withdrawal from participation in the council.

There is also a question regarding what role Trump personally will take with regard to relations with North Korea. During his first term, Trump initially took a very tough stand on North Korean human rights, but he backed down once he began to cultivate a relationship with North Korea's Kim Jong Un. After the very public failure of the second Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi in February 2019, the relationship faded, although Trump did not resume the critical rhetoric of the first year of his first presidential term.

Rubio's record in the U.S. Senate on North Korean human rights is clear. He was a leader in the effort to press North Korea on its human rights abuses. He was the lead sponsor of Senate legislation to extend the North Korean Human Rights Act in 2018 and again in 2021 and 2023. All versions of the legislation called for actions to improve human rights, including the appointment of a special envoy for North Korean human rights. Rubio frequently spoke out on human rights abuses in North Korea, and his Senate record on human rights issues generally, including North Korean human rights, is clear and unequivocal.

Rubio's parents immigrated to the United States from Cuba, arriving in Florida two-and-a-half years before Fidel Castro took control of that island nation. Later, as a state legislator and U.S. senator, he was a leading critic of the Castro regime. His heritage and the importance of the Cuban-American vote in Florida led to Rubio playing a prominent role in foreign affairs issues involving Cuba. His view on human rights is a deeply held personal view, and it extends well beyond Cuba, as his record on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee shows.

North Korean Human Rights in the "America First State Department"

When Trump returned to the Oval Office, among his first official acts on January 20 was to sign, be photographed signing, and publicize his 137 executive orders on a wide variety of topics. Executive orders are official U.S. government documents, and while they do not have the force of laws that are enacted by Congress and signed by the president, they are official directives of the president and are legally binding upon the Executive Branch. During the four years of Trump's first term as president, he signed a total of 220 executive orders. In the following four years under the presidency of Joe Biden, Biden signed 162 executive orders. On January 20, 2025, the day Trump was sworn in as president for his second term, he signed 137 executive orders. Most of these numerous documents were brief and not particularly significant. The principal purpose seems to be to demonstrate with photos and executive orders that Trump was back in the Oval Office with a vengeance.

Among the 137 first-day documents was Executive Order 14150, titled "America First Policy Directive to the Secretary of State." The direction given in this document is that "From this day forward, the foreign policy of the United States shall champion core American interests and always put America and American citizens first." The rhetoric seems to be more bluster than substance. No senior U.S. official is going to take action that is not perceived to be in the country's national interest. The key question is what action the president views to be in the national interest of the United States and how that lines up with his political views and his personal interests.

When Secretary Rubio issued his statement announcing the reorganization of the State Department on April 22, his directive was titled "Building an America First State Department," demonstrating with an obedient nod to Trump's executive order.

It is not yet apparent how or whether North Korean human rights fit into this particular administration. One issue is the appointment of a special envoy for North Korean human rights. Ambassador Julie Turner, a career civil service employee at the State Department, was appointed as special envoy and served from late 2023 until January 2025. As noted, Senator Rubio introduced legislation for the appointment of the special envoy and supported the Senate confirmation of Turner when President Biden nominated her.

As a career State Department employee, the usual practice would have been for Ambassador Turner to continue in her position. Four days after Rubio assumed office, however, she was appointed acting deputy assistant secretary in the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor with a portfolio that includes human rights issues in Africa and East Asia and the Pacific, as well as international labor and multilateral and global affairs. South Korea's JoongAng Daily reported Ambassador

Turner's new position and the reorganization at the State Department, concluding it was "a move that appears to be part of a sweeping downsizing of the State Department's democracy and human rights operations under U.S. President Donald Trump."

The position of special envoy for North Korean human right at the State Department is currently in a state of limbo, and may well remain there. Trump has a consistent record of not appointing a person to that position, while Rubio has a strong record of supporting the appointment of a person to that post.

Already, Trump has taken steps to downgrade and ignore human rights issues. He directed the withdrawal of the United States from participation in the UN Human Rights Council in June 2018 some eighteen months after he assumed office the first time. Just two weeks into his second term as president, in February 2025, Trump issued a presidential order directing that the United States will not participate in the UN Human Rights Council. Such actions are likely to be the norm.

Unfortunately, as Yogi Berra would say, "It's déjà vu all over again."

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Photo from the [U.S. Department of State](#).

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