

The North Korean Question

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, JAN 27 2014

Millions of North Koreans are starving and enslaved while the nations of the region, including South Korea, thrive just miles from their torment. Something has to be done to end this atrocity. Of course, the North's nuclear weapons takes invasion as an option off the table, though there was little inclination in the South or elsewhere for direct intervention in the decades before the regime there acquired its nuclear capability. Nuclear weapons just seal the case as they are indeed the great protector for good or bad regimes.

I think there are three steps that can and should be taken to help free the North, and none involve a confrontation with its regime. They begin with the withdrawal of United States forces from the South. South Korea should take responsibility for its own defense by relieving the United States of its operational control of defenses against the North via the ROK/US Combined Forces Command and by asking the United States to recall the nearly 30,000 US troops still stationed in South Korea. Second, South Korea should lead an international effort to have China eliminate its support for the North and to offer instead sanctuary to those fleeing the North across its less defended border. And third, the United States should end the economic sanctions imposed on the North which appear to hurt the North Korean people much more than they do the North Korean regime.

The Korean War is now 60 years in the past. South Korea has recovered totally from the war and has now the 15th largest economy in the world, twice the population of the North, and is 30 or so times richer on a per capita basis than the North. It is time for the South Koreans to be responsible for their own defenses. They have no excuse. And they would by asking the United States to leave signal to the North that they no longer need foreigners to protect them, and that they are open to a peaceful unification of their country.

Instead, the South Koreans have resisted even taking wartime operational command of their own forces from the United States, forces that number over 640,000 and that rise with mobilization to several million. Plans to have South Korea head the ROK/US Combined Forces Command were put off in 2009 and 2012. It is now scheduled for December 2015, but again the South Koreans are expressing reluctance. Apparently, South Korea wants to avoid, not accelerate, the day of reunification and the responsibility to share the South Korean wealth with the people of the North as unification would likely require. The United States should stop helping the South from looking away from the gulag to its north.

China is North Korea's protector. It saved the North from total defeat in the Korean War and has been the North's main, and perhaps only, international friend in recent years. But China's situation today is quite different from what it was during the Korean War. It is much richer and much more secure today. It no longer needs a dependant regime between itself and Japan. It should welcome a US departure from the Korean peninsula, but also a peaceful end to the Korean division. Pressure should be placed on China to end its propping up of the North Korean government. It too has to recognize the pain inflicted upon the North Korean population. It is time to really end the Korean War and that means that China has to stop acting as the North's guardian.

Sanctions squeeze the innocent people in the North the most. Let food, fuel and consumer goods flow into the North. Most of what flows in will be taken by the elite, but some of the burdens imposed on the innocent in the North might be eased in a land or more, not less. The presence of increased wealth and the absence of foreign forces nearby should weaken the hold on the country of the dictator and the small circle collaborators who surround him. The more

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the North opens, the more likely its people will gain some freedom. Nothing regarding the North will be easy, but perpetuating the status quo is unacceptable.

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About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.