



## WHY NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS IS A REGIONAL SECURITY ISSUE

BY ROB YORK

*Rob York is director for regional affairs at the Pacific Forum. He previously worked as a production editor for The South China Morning Post and chief editor of NK News. He is also a PhD candidate in Korean history at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.*

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Whatever the rationale, I had some tentative hope at the end of 2017 and start of 2018 that the Trump administration would do the right thing on North Korea. While [President Donald Trump's speech](#) to Seoul's National Assembly in November 2017 was mostly lauded for its praise of South Korea and their success in modernizing, as well as his relative restraint in threatening North Korea, he also used his speech to highlight the North's mistreatment of its own citizens. His State of the Union address the following January [highlighted](#) not only the Warmbier family, who lost their son Otto to the North's predations, but also North Koreans who risked life and health to escape.

Then, in February 2018, [Trump met](#) with escapees from North Korea. After listening to their "amazing" stories, he was implored to do more to bring attention to their plight, especially the repatriation of defectors back to the North from China.

North Korea's crimes against humanity have been documented extensively by human rights advocates such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. And yet, such aggression against the rights, dignity, and even the lives of North Korean citizenry consistently takes a back seat to the threat posed by its nuclear and missile programs.

The closest human rights have ever come to centrality in discussion on North Korea took place in the latter half of the 2014, following the release of [the report](#) by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK. The report catalogued the state's sustained assault on freedoms of speech, religion, and association, the routine sexual violence—particularly against women in its prison camps—and the government's role in exacerbating the catastrophic famine of the 1990s. Its panel explicitly compared North Korea's atrocities to the Holocaust. One member [even suggested](#) that the regime's very nature was incompatible with human rights reform.

This led, later in 2014, to resolutions at the UN General Assembly and Security Council condemning these abuses. While Russia and China, who have made clear over the years that they consider North Korean collapse or destabilization not in their interests, prevented actual punitive measures at the UNSC, the UNGA ultimately [adapted the resolution](#) after dozens of countries co-sponsored it.

More than five years removed from those votes, a pair of things stand out. One is how North Korea itself reacted to the news. While most observers saw China's and Russia's veto of the resolution at the UNSC as inevitable, Pyongyang appeared visibly rattled by the proceedings, launching unhinged and personalized attacks on [members of the panel](#) and [leaders](#) supportive of the resolution. It attempted to articulate an [alternative vision](#) of human rights, and attempted to discredit defectors who served as witnesses (with [mixed results](#)).

Along the way, they revealed that the considered attacks on the "[dignity of the Supreme Leadership](#)" uniquely difficult to bear.

Secondly was how quickly a pair of engagement-minded leaders, former presidents Barack Obama and Park Geun-hye, embraced the resolution. Both had been elected promising a different (i.e. warmer) relationship with the North following a deterioration of ties under their predecessors. Both had reached out to Pyongyang with proposals—Park's were ([crudely](#)) rejected out of hand; at least one of Obama's was embraced in 2012, only to have its spirit violated [shortly thereafter](#).

Obama and Park's embrace of the human rights agenda for North Korea, late and half-hearted as it was, was the right thing to do. That they probably did so for the wrong reasons—diplomacy had gone nowhere and they appeared unsure of their next move—matters little in the end.

Except as a contrast to the actions of their predecessors. Park's successor Moon Jae-in has shown no interest in the subject, and instead focused on an agenda of inter-Korean reconciliation. To the extent that he has shown a passion for human rights, it's in those of Koreans victimized by Japan decades ago.

As for Trump, the exceedingly brief period between the end of 2017 and start of 2018 represents the totality of his engagement with the issue. Instead, he sought to strike a deal and rid the Korean peninsula of nuclear weapons—a dilemma a generation of American diplomats failed to resolve before him. And the reason for that is something North Korea seems to know, though its US and South Korean interlocutors appear on the US and South Korean side evidently not to—neither peaceful unification nor peaceful coexistence with democratic South Korea is possible while Pyongyang exercises the right to violate its subjects' human rights at will.

And as long as neither of those are possible, North Korea will defend itself with nuclear weapons. This realization does not mean ruling out negotiations, and it does not mean opening the door to war for regime change. It only means doing the right thing—giving a voice to escapees, supplying those in the country with information and a means of escape, and working with the international community to speak with one voice on the subject.

And since Washington seeks to avoid both war and the recognition of North Korea's nuclear status, avoiding human rights means perpetual stalemate.

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