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POLICY BRIEF

Renewing the Approach Towards North Korea

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INTRODUCTION

North Korea is an international security concern because of both its nuclear and missile proliferation activities and its human rights record. Yet, the current policy approach led by the US is failing to improve the security situation and urgently needs to be reassessed and reframed. Sustained dialogue must become a key component of policy.

Research has highlighted how the current theory of change underpinning the US and European approach to North Korea – coercing it to change its destabilising behaviour – is at odds with a widely held understanding of North Korea’s threat perceptions and desire to sustain the ruling regime.¹ Instead, policy should be guided by a theory of change based on incremental, long-term improvements that restrict nuclear activities and improve the socioeconomic rights of the North Korean people. Without proactive efforts to alter the relationship through engagement, the situation is unlikely to change. Dialogue and engagement should not be limited to specific nuclear negotiations, but should cover broader security issues and seek to build trust and confidence. Nor should they be pursued without boundaries, such as the encouragement of tourism. If governments are genuinely interested in improving the security situation, discrete, government-backed dialogue and engagement opportunities to build trust and reduce misunderstanding must become a sustained addition to the existing policy framework.

This Policy Brief first addresses why past and current policy approaches have not yielded sustainable and successful outcomes, focusing primarily on the approach taken by the US and the influence this has had on European allies. The approaches taken by South Korea, China, Japan or Russia are not discussed in detail here. The Policy Brief then sets out an alternative policy framework that focuses on increasing the role of direct dialogue and engagement to balance the pressure tactics that have thus far been favoured. This includes a number of concrete recommendations for improving policy towards North Korea.

THE CURRENT APPROACH AND ITS WEAKNESSES

Nuclear proliferation and human rights issues are both theoretically and practically linked in North Korea. They are the two most important tools the regime uses to sustain itself: nuclear weapons support regime security by deterring external military interference; and systemic human rights violations suppress internal opposition. At the same time, concessions such as economic aid, food assistance and energy provisions have been offered in exchange for North Korea halting or limiting its nuclear weapons-related activities. Although humanitarian aid can be distinct from human rights, the need for continuous aid provisions is largely a result of Pyongyang

1. Cristina Varriale, ‘Exploring the Nexus Between Human Rights and Denuclearisation in North Korea’, RUSI Conference Report, 9 December 2020.

not fulfilling citizens' basic rights, such as a right to food. Furthermore, UN Security Council Resolution 2397 (2017) references both North Korea's human rights abuses and its illegal nuclear weapons programme, and explicitly notes that developing nuclear and missile programmes redirects resources away from delivering on the needs and rights of the North Korean people. Despite the links between these two issues, policy responses have remained somewhat siloed.

Much of the policy discourse in the UK and across Europe regarding these security concerns has been dominated by US policy preferences. US policy – across multiple administrations – has largely prioritised isolating North Korea both politically and economically, with opportunities for improved relations often predicated on a change in North Korea's behaviour, especially taking steps towards denuclearisation.²

This policy approach has broadly focused on trying to alter the regime's cost-benefit analysis through pressure and isolation.³ Economically, this has involved expanding the sanctions regime against the country, both multilaterally via the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the EU, and unilaterally, with some countries passing additional sanctions against North Korea. Since the UNSC first imposed sanctions against North Korea in 2006,⁴ in response to its first nuclear test, the sanctions regime has become progressively more stringent. Initially, arms trade and materials directly related to WMD proliferation efforts were the main areas of restriction, but the most recent resolutions in 2017 broadened the scope of sanctions to include coal, iron and iron ore, as well as commodities such as seafood⁵ and textile exports.⁶ Despite this, North Korea's nuclear programme has continued to develop, and even if this growth has continued at a slower pace than if the sanctions had not been in place, restrictions have not prevented continued vertical proliferation.

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2. Frank Aum and Daniel Jasper, 'The Case for Maximizing Engagement with North Korea', *38 North*, 16 April 2021.
 3. Markus Garlauskas, 'It's Time to Get Real on North Korea', United States Institute of Peace, 9 February 2021.
 4. UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1695 was passed in July 2006 and prevents the transfer of missiles or missile-related items to North Korea. See UN, 'Security Council Condemns Democratic People's Republic of Korea's Missile Launches, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1695 (2006)', 15 July 2006, <<https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8778.doc.htm>>, accessed 12 October 2021. UNSCR 1718 was passed in October 2006 in response to North Korea's first nuclear test earlier that month. See UN, 'Resolution 1718 (2006)', 14 October 2006, <<https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/1718-%282006%29>>, accessed 12 October 2021.
 5. UNSCR 2371 (2017), 5 August 2017, <<https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2371-%282017%29>>, accessed 12 October 2021.
 6. UNSCR 2375 (2017), 11 September 2017, <<https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2375-%282017%29>>, accessed 12 October 2021.

A narrative of
'not engaging
until behaviour
changes' has been
prominent

The primary aim of sanctions, both unilateral and multilateral, is to restrict revenue-raising streams that could be used to support ongoing proliferation efforts and create pressure on the regime to change its calculus. Sanctions certainly have a role in restricting proliferation efforts through a variety of mechanisms. When implemented effectively, they can deny funds to proliferators, restrict or deny access to key materials, and interdict shipments to prevent them from reaching their destination, where items could be used to support nuclear weapons development. However, they have also created implications for maintaining a balanced approach that includes opportunities for engagement efforts. Specifically, NGOs and UN agencies working on projects related to humanitarian security, or localised human rights initiatives such as programmes to improve the lives of those living with disabilities, have struggled to maintain in-country operations because of decisions regarding sanctions implementation. Rather than taking a white-listing approach which would give predetermined organisations exemptions to continue to move the necessary resources into North Korea, a blanket de-risking approach has been applied which creates practical restrictions for humanitarian activities. In addition to the tangible benefits such activities bring, they also help expose North Koreans to people from other countries,⁷ which in turn improves on-the-ground information about a country that is known to be difficult to understand.

Political isolation and military pressure have also been used to punish the North Korean leadership for its actions. It is hoped that by creating this pressure, the regime will feel less secure and seek to change its course. As North Korea has developed its nuclear and missile capabilities and more information has come to light about its human rights situation, a narrative of 'not engaging until behaviour changes' has been prominent, with some arguing that a change in behaviour in one area (such as human rights) should be set as a precondition for relationship changes that might aid progress in another (nuclear proliferation).⁸ This argument is based on the assumption that restricting engagement with North Korea punishes the regime by withholding any legitimacy it might derive from such diplomatic interactions. Although this is not official US policy, legitimacy concerns have been used as leverage in policy towards North Korea.⁹ Furthermore, this approach restricts what Congress is willing to support, not least because US sanctions against North Korea's human rights abuses and proliferation activities are intertwined.

The prioritisation of isolation has at times been at odds with the preferred approach of South Korean administrations, which has fluctuated between a

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7. Charlotte Fitzek, 'How British Trainers Quietly Help Shape North Korean Education', *The Diplomat*, 30 March 2017; Mike Cowin, "'Critical Engagement': British Policy Toward the DPRK', Walter H Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, April 2015, <<https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/publication/%E2%80%9Ccritical-engagement%E2%80%9D-british-policy-toward-dprk>>, accessed 8 October 2021.
 8. Bruce Klingner, 'U.S. – North Korea Summit Deal on Denuclearization Faltering', Heritage Foundation, 4 September 2018.
 9. Garlauskas, 'It's Time to Get Real on North Korea'.

policy preference of pressure and isolation under conservative governments (who held office from 2008 to 2017) to attempts to prioritise inter-Korean engagement and cooperation under more liberal administrations. Thus, the prioritisation of engagement versus other policy approaches can swiftly change course after presidential elections, resulting in volatile policy.

The UK and the EU have played an important role in broader engagement efforts with North Korea, maintaining a policy of 'critical engagement'. In theory, this approach balances punitive action and sustained engagement.¹⁰ In practice, however, engagement has become increasingly difficult, and activities have become almost non-existent, with the decline in engagement correlating with the advance of North Korea's nuclear and missile developments and expanded sanctions resolutions. This has only been made worse over the past 18 months as restrictions resulting from the coronavirus pandemic have necessitated the temporary closure of European embassies in Pyongyang. The North Korean regime also fluctuates in its receptiveness to cooperative dialogue, being open to engagement only when it suits its interests and quickly making it difficult to sustain when it does not.

Although policy responses to these related but separate security issues have not always been linked in practice, the broad policy framework is comparable.¹¹ This approach of isolation and pressure has been applied in response to both proliferation and human rights concerns in North Korea. It has largely persisted in the absence of consistent parallel opportunities for dialogue to build trust and confidence, and reduce tension, miscalculation or misunderstanding. Although obstacles to dialogue are not one-sided, and the North Korean regime fluctuates in its willingness to participate, there has also been little appetite in US policy to pursue general engagement with North Korea to change the relationship. Where dialogue has occurred, it has been limited to nuclear negotiations. This approach has its origins in the George W Bush administration, but it has been a feature of all US administrations since, including the Obama administration's 'strategic patience' approach and the Trump administration's 'maximum pressure' campaign. Although the last few decades have been punctuated by negotiations to limit and roll back North Korea's nuclear activities, these efforts have been intermittent across nearly 30 years of North Korea's nuclear programme, often relying on an upfront concession from Pyongyang, and are limited in their approach.¹²

Furthermore, there has been little evidence to suggest that North Korea has been committed to relinquishing its nuclear weapons. Instead, what these episodes of diplomacy demonstrate is that, at times, North Korea has been willing to trade parts of its nuclear programme for other short-term benefits

10. Cowin, "Critical Engagement".

11. Varriale, 'Exploring the Nexus Between Human Rights and Denuclearisation in North Korea'.

12. Cristina Varriale, 'A Long Road to Denuclearisation: Challenges to Security-Based Diplomacy with North Korea', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (December 2018).

but has not committed to a change in its perceived need to retain a nuclear weapons capability.

Current policy frameworks have largely relied on a theory of change that prioritises and expects significant changes to the actions and perceptions of North Korea in short periods of time, through the application of economic and political pressure, without efforts to fundamentally address the drivers of the issues.¹³ In practice, this has meant policy has been incomplete, limiting engagement to narrow nuclear negotiations with the regime in Pyongyang until it improves or changes its behaviour.¹⁴

A policy framework that prioritises pressure and isolation without sustained dialogue and engagement is problematic for several reasons:

1. It largely relies on two unfounded premises: that through isolation and pressure, the North Korean regime can be coerced economically and diplomatically into changing its behaviour; and that North Korea will alter its behaviour upfront to alleviate the concerns of the international community and unilaterally open opportunities for improved relations. This fails to understand and address the drivers behind Pyongyang's activities and its prioritisation of regime longevity and survival.
2. This approach suggests that diplomacy and engagement are rewards that must be earned, rather than tools for change. The assumed theory of change that underpins the current policy framework of omitting regular and consistent engagement efforts will not yield the expected results of an improved security situation.
3. Relying on sanctions as the primary tool to induce change is weakened by their inadequate levels of implementation. Sanctions do not enjoy robust enforcement, and North Korea's appetite and ability to circumvent these measures – albeit at a higher cost than would-be permitted licit trade – demonstrates a preference to adapt behaviours in restricted circumstances rather than proactively seeking diplomatic opportunities that could lead to more legitimate trade. Although sanctions are important tools, many studies have shown that they are not robustly enforced and are regularly breached,¹⁵ with other governments likely complicit. This approach therefore relies too heavily on other antagonistic or agnostic actors and stakeholders, such as China, being cooperative to achieve economic coercion. As a result, policy should not depend solely on sanctions as the main tool to induce change.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Aum and Jasper, 'The Case for Maximizing Engagement with North Korea'.

15. Andrea Berger, 'A House Without Foundations: The North Korea Sanctions Regime and Its Implementation', *Whitehall Report*, 3-17 (June 2017). See also multiple reports by RUSI's Project Sandstone, <<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/projects/project-sandstone>>, accessed 8 October 2021.

Today, the international community is facing a dilemma. Confidence and trust between key stakeholders are low, resulting in limited interest and opportunities for direct engagement. Furthermore, the stringent sanctions regime lacks robust implementation, but should not be rolled back without improvements to the security situation and specific steps that limit or alter the activities for which they intended to penalise North Korea. That said, opportunities to explore ways in which sanctions could be rolled back are unlikely to occur, because trust and confidence are low and the opportunities to build or improve them are lacking. Therefore, adapting the policy framework to ensure this loop is not stuck on repeat will be vital to improving security regarding North Korea.

A NEW POLICY FRAMEWORK

A reassessment of the broad policy framework towards North Korea is necessary for three reasons:

1. The current approach has endured for some time, despite limited success, and the activities and behaviours that cause security concerns continue to exist without limits or obvious avenues for de-escalation.
2. The Biden administration has undertaken a policy review on North Korea,¹⁶ potentially creating an opportunity to influence a change in approach.
3. The UK stated in its 2021 Integrated Review that it will be the most engaged non-regional partner on North Korean denuclearisation,¹⁷ raising questions as to how the UK and other non-regional states might be able to positively contribute to improving the security situation regarding North Korea.

Through a workshop and interviews with senior US experts,¹⁸ an assessment of the policy nexus between human rights and denuclearisation in North Korea led to five key findings:

1. For both human rights and denuclearisation, there is a common, preferred theory of change and preference for small incremental steps among the experts engaged. The current policy approach does not reflect this.

16. Sang-Min Kim and Julia Masterson, 'Biden's North Korea Policy Review: Toward a More Effective Strategy', Arms Control Association, Issue Briefs (Vol. 13, No. 2, 13 April 2021).

17. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, CP 403 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021).

18. Varriale, 'Exploring the Nexus Between Human Rights and Denuclearisation in North Korea'.

2. The UK and the EU should play a bigger role in direct dialogue with North Korea.
3. NGOs could play a bigger role in dialogue efforts with North Korea.
4. There is appetite for increased engagement among those working on human rights and nuclear issues.
5. Gross human rights abuses will remain the more difficult area to address, but governments must keep this issue prominent on the international agenda.

Based on these findings, an increased focus on proactive dialogue and engagement opportunities – at both governmental and non-governmental levels – should be added to the broad policy framework to guide responses to the security concerns presented by North Korea. Each of these findings, and associated recommendations, are discussed in more detail below.

Finding 1: For both human rights and denuclearisation, there is a common, preferred theory of change and preference for small incremental steps among the experts engaged. The current policy approach does not reflect this.

The workshop and expert interviews conducted for this research found that there are many similarities in the preferred theory of change for both human rights and nuclear proliferation issues in North Korea. These commonalities do not necessitate policy responses being tied in practice, nor efforts in one area being predicated on efforts and improvements in the other, but many working on these issues in governments and NGOs have argued that the dominant US framework for dealing with North Korea is incomplete and lacks the tools to deliver the desired behavioural changes. This is the result of a perception that improvements to the security situation are most likely to be realised through slow and incremental efforts that are achieved through cooperative engagement with North Korea.¹⁹

North Korea will not make drastic changes to activities that it believes are necessary for its own security. The regime has, however, demonstrated and acted upon an interest in small-scale efforts, for example, working with the UK embassy on projects to improve the lives of those living with disabilities or cooperating with the US to return the remains of those killed in action in the Korean War. The current approach, however, is contradictory to this experience and is not well placed to pursue regular engagement opportunities. It expects significant changes to occur as a result of economic and political pressure, without the sustainment of off-ramps. Furthermore, previous research by the Proliferation and Nuclear Policy programme,²⁰ as

19. *Ibid.*

20. Varriale, 'A Long Road to Denuclearisation'.

well as that by others,²¹ has acknowledged that past diplomatic efforts on North Korea's nuclear programme have failed because they do not recognise the complex security situation and the drivers underpinning the security threats, and have not sought to change the nature of the relationship with North Korea through building trust and confidence.

Recommendations

1. Small, incremental changes achieved via dialogue with North Korea should be better utilised in policy approaches towards the country.
2. More direct dialogue to build trust and confidence should be sought as part of a proactive policy approach towards North Korea with the aim of rectifying failures in past diplomatic efforts.

Finding 2: The UK and the EU should play a bigger role in direct engagement activities with North Korea.

It is unlikely that the security relationship between the US and North Korea will improve quickly. The UK and the EU should therefore utilise their established relationships with North Korea to play a more active role in general engagement with Pyongyang.

Given the UK's established diplomatic relationship with North Korea, experience in delivering language programmes – which provide opportunities for people-to-people engagement – and support for people with disabilities in North Korea,²² and the EU's history of human rights engagement and humanitarian support,²³ both are well positioned to lead on such activities. Although this should be coordinated with allies, especially the US and South Korea, to ensure that opportunities for North Korea to perceive and exploit divergence between allies is limited, it should not be predicated on a thawing of relations between Washington and Pyongyang.

Expanding the role of the UK and the EU in fostering better relations with North Korea could help pave the way for long-term improvements by building trust and confidence and improving understanding of the regime through dialogue without requiring significant changes in positions from the US or North Korea in the near term. It was due to the UK's diplomatic presence and engagements in Pyongyang that the UK was able to support projects to

21. Toby Dalton and Youngjun Kim, 'Negotiating Nuclear Arms Control with North Korea: Why and How?', *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* (Vol. 33, No. 1, 2021), pp. 1–21.

22. See Fitzek, 'How British Trainers Quietly Help Shape North Korean Education'; UK Parliament, 'North Korea: Question for Foreign and Commonwealth Office', 29 July 2014, <<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2014-07-29/HL1623/>>, accessed 12 October 2021.

23. Geir Helgesen and Hatla Thelle, *Dialogue with North Korea? Preconditions for Talking Human Rights with a Hermit Kingdom* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2013).

improve the lives of people with disabilities in North Korea. This should be recognised as an important, albeit small, effort and replicated.

Recommendations

1. The UK and the EU should seek to play a more active role in general engagement with North Korea. For example, both the UK and the EU should foster socioeconomic rights-based cooperation, such as developing cooperative projects that prioritise improving the lives of those living with disabilities, as an area in which North Korea has demonstrated an interest, along with women's health. Given the UK's established diplomatic relationship with North Korea and the EU's history of humanitarian engagement, both are well positioned to lead on such activities.
2. Specifically for the UK, English-language training in North Korean schools and universities should be encouraged. This would not only help build an improved understanding of life inside North Korea and state priorities through curriculum development, but could act as data points for tacit knowledge, as well as opportunities for information flow both into and out of North Korea. Language programmes, although only making a small contribution to the bigger picture, are a tangible way in which some North Koreans can have exposure to foreigners and help to generate a better on-the-ground understanding of the country.

Finding 3: NGOs could play a bigger role in dialogue efforts with North Korea.

Although NGOs have long played an important role in working to improve human rights in North Korea, they are less recognised as important implementors of activities related to denuclearisation or broader security issues. The research analysis concluded that NGOs can play a role in fostering improved relations with North Korea, which would also benefit dialogue and diplomacy on nuclear issues.

To support efforts to address nuclear issues, NGOs should explore ways in which they can focus on building relationships that could underpin broader denuclearisation activities. One example of how this has been done in the past is the Nautilus Institute's programme on energy security.²⁴ This provided unparalleled insight into North Korean energy security through a series of workshops involving North Korean participants. Learnings from such engagements can be used to inform incentives and tradeoffs in nuclear diplomacy. They not only improve the understanding of North Korea's perception of the issues discussed but could also build trust

24. For more information on this project, see Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, 'DPRK Energy Experts Working Group 2006–2010', <<https://nautilus.org/projects/by-name/dprk-energy/>>, accessed 12 October 2021.

through developing relationships and provide insight into opportunities for government-to-government cooperation.

Recommendations

1. Policymakers and NGO representatives should cooperate to explore opportunities for track two or track 1.5 dialogue on security issues more broadly. This could cover climate change and environmental security, energy security and regional conventional security issues. Dialogue on climate change and energy security can engage North Korea on other important issues that tangentially relate to human rights and denuclearisation.
2. Non-governmental dialogue could also include the pursuit of technical and nuclear safety and security dialogue with North Korea at the academic level. Academic nuclear safety and security engagement can help develop people-to-people engagement in activities potentially less sensitive than those explicitly related to denuclearisation, such as verification, but could also provide opportunities to gain knowledge about North Korea's nuclear operations, which may help inform governmental approaches to denuclearisation. North Korea has referenced its intention to be a responsible nuclear power²⁵ and engaging in such activities would be a good way to demonstrate this.

Finding 4: There is appetite for increased engagement among those working on human rights and nuclear issues in the context of North Korea.

Only through bringing together experts in both human rights and nuclear issues has this research analysis been able to develop a more complete picture of policy towards North Korea. Communication between different expert communities should therefore be improved. This research has identified three key benefits to having regular communication between different expert groups:

1. To help improve the broad understanding of North Korea, especially for those who focus on single-issue areas for governments and NGOs.
2. To aid understanding of Pyongyang's perception of the links between these issues and how the regime might leverage these to its own benefit. As previously discussed, responses to both human rights and denuclearisation cannot be forced upon North Korea, and a better understanding of how Pyongyang might be linking these issues and

25. KCNA, 'Kim Jong Un Makes Report on Work of WPK Central Committee at Its 7th Congress', 7 May 2016, <<https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1546587644-964527319/kim-jong-un-makes-report-on-work-of-wpk-central-committee-at-its-7th-congress/?t=1641811812341>>, accessed 12 October 2021.

its cooperative engagement in these areas will help policymakers and NGOs act accordingly.

3. To help inform the development of more coherent policy upfront. By improving cooperation and communication between interlocutors engaging with North Korea, communication could help to: manage and reduce opportunities for North Korea to exploit unintended inconsistencies and trade off engagement opportunities against each other; improve understanding of the impacts of actions in one area on the other; and pre-empt potential conflicts in implementation, rather than addressing these retrospectively.

Recommendations

1. The establishment of a private, NGO-led forum could provide a platform through which stakeholders working in and with North Korea can communicate, share experiences and best practice, and pre-empt policy and implementation conflicts.
2. This would be best established as a series of small, regular working group meetings to build sustainable relationships between participants. Such meetings are likely to be more effective in person, as this will allow participants to build rapport and engage more freely. Therefore, such an effort should be postponed until the coronavirus pandemic allows global in-person groups to gather safely.

Finding 5: Gross human rights abuses will remain the more difficult area of human rights issues to address, but governments must keep this issue prominent on the international agenda.

North Korea's systemic human rights abuses that amount to crimes against humanity, which the regime likely sees as imperative to their grip on power, will remain difficult to address, and near-term opportunities to directly improve this situation will likely be limited. In practice, reduced opportunities to address egregious human rights abuses, such as the use of torture and political prison camps, should not impede dialogue on denuclearisation or other areas of human rights that might be more amenable to cooperation, as discussed above. Previously, the option of engaging with North Korea broadly until Pyongyang is willing to address its egregious human rights abuses has been criticised,²⁶ as doing so merely appeases the regime, plays to its agenda, and provides aid and provisions to ultimately underpin its longevity. However, withholding all types of dialogue that could support small changes in other areas of human rights, such as improving the lives of those living with disabilities (as noted above), would allow the regime to continue its control unrestricted. Given the scale and gravity of these abuses, they should not be ignored.

26. *Reuters*, 'Rights Progress a Must for N.Korea–U.S. Ties: Envoy', 19 April 2007.

Recommendations

1. It is imperative that, at a minimum, existing data collection efforts by UN agencies and NGOs continue to record human rights abuses. Human rights issues are not static, and it is essential to maintain efforts to collect information and evidence in relation to the ongoing situation.
2. Governments such as the US, the UK, South Korea and countries across the EU must continue to express severe concerns over human rights abuses in North Korea in international forums to ensure the issue remains visible and prioritised internationally, irrespective of denuclearisation diplomacy or other localised human rights engagements. This will not only keep the issue visible to the international community, but will help to demonstrate the ongoing need for resources to be allocated to NGOs and UN agencies' efforts to collect data and respond to these concerns.

CURRENT LIMITATIONS

The coronavirus pandemic has created notable implications for the proposed approach and activities emanating from this research. North Korea has closed its external borders, which has made it increasingly difficult for diplomatic missions, UN agencies and NGOs to continue to operate in the country. The increased self-imposed isolation attributed to North Korea's coronavirus response highlights the importance of retaining the country's diplomatic presence across Europe; without this, government and NGO opportunities to engage with the North Korean government will be extremely limited. Opportunities for dialogue should not be viewed as a reward or punishment. Instead, diplomatic missions should be understood as presenting channels for improved engagement at the governmental level.

Furthermore, the legitimate presence of North Korean officials across Europe creates opportunities for dialogue outside North Korea that NGOs can also leverage. States hosting North Korean diplomatic missions should not seek to close North Korean embassies as retribution for provocative action, as has happened in the past,²⁷ but must be alert to the risk that North Korea's diplomatic missions are likely involved in illicit activities,²⁸ and proactively cooperate with public and private sector institutions within their borders and regions to mitigate such activities.²⁹

27. *Reuters*, 'Australia, Citing Nuclear Test, Bars North Korea from Reopening Embassy', 7 March 2013.

28. Mathew Ha, 'UN Report Highlights How North Korea's Embassies Help Pyongyang Flout Sanctions', *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 1 October 2020.

29. For more detail on this, see RUSI's work on countering proliferation finance, and in particular, Anagha Joshi, Emil Dall and Darya Dolzikova, 'Guide to Conducting a National Proliferation Financing Risk Assessment', RUSI Special Resources, 13 May 2019, <<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/>

The increased self-imposed isolation attributed to North Korea's coronavirus response highlights the importance of retaining the country's diplomatic presence across Europe

CONCLUSION

An effort to boost dialogue endeavours should not be confused with a preference to devalue or remove sanctions without a change in Pyongyang's behaviour. Instead, it should be seen as an effort to proactively develop and sustain direct engagement so opportunities to improve the situation are increased. There are multiple ways in which this can be achieved, through the expansion of pre-existing governmental engagements or through creating new opportunities for NGO and academic dialogues. What is certain is that the current approach must be modified to include regular and sustained dialogue if policymakers want to improve the security situation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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