Lessons Learned for Promoting Human Security in North Korea

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North Korea is a conflict-affected state facing the inter-related challenges of underdevelopment and human insecurity, as well as poor governance structures and policies. The international community has a moral obligation to aid the most vulnerable in North Korea—not only because of the latter’s entitlement rights due to a shared humanity, but also because of the negative impact of some of the policies that have been adopted toward the DPRK by actors on the international stage. This moral obligation is linked to principles underlying the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) paradigm. In the case of North Korea, however, R2P faces serious obstacles. This paper, therefore, not only looks to how best strategically to engage with North Korea, but also to what lessons can be learned from the study of what can be seen, to a greater or lesser extent, as regional post-conflict development success studies; South Korea, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

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Introduction

As addressed in the first article in this special issue, there is an international security continuum wherein “new” human-centered approaches are intimately related to “old” state-centric considerations; nontraditional security issues have the potential to become traditional security threats; and issues of human security can morph into ones of pressing concern for the survival of states themselves, or the peace and security of a region, or even the globe. Perhaps the best example of this relationship is to be found in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the failure of national and international policymakers adequately to address the complexities of the situation. Furthermore, security, development, and governance issues are intimately related, no more so than at the level of the individual in a conflict-affected state. This paper, therefore, looks briefly to draw lessons for international engagement with North Korea from the post-conflict development experiences of those case studies often viewed as regional success stories.

As also noted in the first paper, it is both a normative (humanitarian) and a rational (security) imperative to engage constructively with Pyongyang and look to provide safe havens for the most vulnerable of North Korea’s citizenry. While hostility is
understandable among neighbors previously victimized by North Korean aggression or forced to address aggressive statements and actions emanating from Pyongyang, taking a hard line in response may contribute toward a vicious cycle whereby the DPRK either perceives a dangerous external security environment necessitating further internal sacrifices and military prioritization, or uses the environment as justification for such measures. These measures are likely to hasten regime collapse in the DPRK and thereby increase further the nontraditional security threats posed by North Korea to surrounding countries, and/or the traditional security threats in terms of diversionary acts of aggression to divert internal constituencies from the problems generated at home by Pyongyang’s policies. Unpalatable as it may seem, some process of engagement with North Korea might mitigate Pyongyang’s security concerns, and also help the internal situation remove both justifications and motivations for dangerous policy prioritization in the DPRK.

North Korea is certainly a conflict-affected state, and therefore faces the interrelated challenges of underdevelopment and human insecurity, as well as poor governance structures and policies. Indeed, the DPRK is essentially a failed state when considered in terms of providing the basic governance functions of reconciling conflicting interests and generating collective good. Kim Kwan-jin, an economist and banker from North Korea who defected in 2003, recently noted that essentially, the DPRK has already collapsed, and that just the skeleton of the regime is left, with a shrinking economy, the execution or defection of scapegoats, and a loss of public trust.1

The international community has a moral obligation to aid the most vulnerable in North Korea not only because of the latter’s entitlement rights due to a shared humanity, but also because of the negative impact of some of the policies which have been adopted toward the DPRK by actors on the international stage. While states remain primarily responsible for the protection of their citizens, this perspective is also closely associated with the international duty to provide “safe havens” ensuring freedom from fear and want when national governments are unable or unwilling to so. This normative paradigm has been distilled into the responsibility to protect (R2P). Both article one, Security Governance Norms and North Korea, and article two, The Responsibility to Protect and Northeast Asia: The Case of North Korea, of this special issue note, however, the difficulties of extrapolating from this responsibility, an international duty to intervene in East Asia in general, and in North Korea in particular. There remain significant normative as well as practical obstacles to conducting an international humanitarian intervention, regardless of the prima facie evidence of the DPRK’s strong candidature.

This paper will consider what exactly the international community can and should do to promote human security and development in North Korea. First, the limitations of R2P and humanitarian intervention will be addressed, followed by the shortcomings of other elements of international strategic engagement with Pyongyang. This will be followed by analysis of what worked well in stimulating post-conflict development and protecting human security in South Korea, and in the case studies analyzed in articles three and four, From Authoritarian to Democratic Models of Post-Conflict Development: The Indonesian Experience and Vietnam and Challenges to Human Security, of the special issue. Finally, in each case, this article will consider the transferability of lessons learned to dealing with North Korea.