

U.S.-ROK Human Rights Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two years, The United States and South Korea have developed a similar approach to a range of human rights issues, starting with North Korea. Both Washington and Seoul have sought to strike a balance between pragmatism (like shunning the Dalai Lama) and human rights principles. Yet, no discernible effort has been made to coordinate policies to date. Before 2008, coordination at the governmental level was difficult due to the presence of liberal governments in Seoul and a conservative government in Washington. The National Human Rights Commission focused primarily on human rights in South Korea and was blocked from conducting work on North Korea. The situation was similar at non-governmental organizations like the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy and the Korean branch of Amnesty International. The United Nations is one potential venue for human rights policy coordination. The UN has passed five resolutions condemning the human rights situation in the North. Unfortunately, the United States is not a member of the UN Human Rights Commission due to Bush Administration's objections. The Obama Administration has yet made a decision on whether to join.

Even though the prospects for human rights advances in the North is bleak in the short to medium term, a number of steps should be taken to improve U.S.-South Korean human rights coordination. First, the envoys from each country should hold regular meetings. During the Bush years, the two envoys never met! Now that Washington has established a full-time envoy, it is time for Seoul to do the same thing. Second, human rights should become a component of bilateral security talks with North Korea. Third, both governments must improve their outreach and public awareness campaigns. Fourth, there is need for coordination between South Korean non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their American counterparts. Fifth, human rights should be worked into the on-going nuclear talks with the North, possibly through the Northeast Asia Peace and Security mechanism. Finally, Washington and Seoul should establish the North Korean Refugee Protection and Resettlement Organization.