Through the 1980s, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) seemed hermetically sealed to outsiders, a true “hermit kingdom.” Ideologically allied with the Soviet Union and China as part of the socialist bloc during the Cold War, North Korea was relatively isolated and independent from Eastern European allies. North Korea even stood aloof from economic groupings such as Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), a grouping that promoted economic relations among the Soviet bloc countries during the cold war. Despite North Korea’s economic dependence on Chinese and Soviet patrons, outsiders were kept at a distance from the inner workings of North Korea’s leadership. Suspicious of foreigners and the influence of great powers, the North Korean leadership cultivated isolation and opaqueness as distinctive characteristics that served to reinforce political control of the Great Leader.

The DPRK leadership cultivated core principles that are deeply antithetical to many of the assumptions that have come to be accepted as normative principles of interaction between states and the international community. Among the core principles the North Korean leadership has emphasized are juche (self-reliance) and resistance to any interaction that hints at compromise on sovereignty-related issues. These ideas place North Korea’s leadership at the center of its own world and are profoundly in opposition to the trends of global integration and globalization that have accelerated at the end of the twentieth century. As new avenues of contact have opened up with North Korea during the past two decades—and as inexorable forces of globalization have opened up North Korea to necessary contact with the outside world—the task of managing the effects of

1 The first draft of this article was prepared for presentation at a Georgetown University conference entitled, “Future of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia,” March 26, 2007, co-hosted by Dong A Ilbo, International Policy Studies Institute (IPSI), Ilmin International Relations Institute (IIRI) at Korea University, and Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service, Asian Studies Program. The opinions contained in this paper are those of the author and do not reflect views of The Asia Foundation or Pacific Forum CSIS.
that contact while maintaining the political integrity of a society constructed and mobilized to place its own leader at the center of all things has become increasingly impossible. Yet the challenge of gaining benefits from the outside world while fighting rear-guard actions to limit external influences on North Korea’s internal political system has been the core strategy of North Korea’s leadership for almost two decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union marked the end of the cold war.

Only by stepping back and understanding the extent to which North Korea’s leaders regard the changes accompanying opening to the outside world as an existential threat can one appreciate why in every aspect of North Korea’s interaction with the outside world—whether it be the nuclear issue or the food crisis or prospects for economic reform or the issue of abductions, human rights, or refugee issues—the issue of transparency as it applies to North Korea is so contentious, and the reciprocity and conditionalities accepted as standard operating procedure for states in cooperation with international organizations have been fundamentally resisted by North Korea, in many cases to her own detriment. The enduring dilemmas of North Korea for the past two decades in every sphere of interaction with the outside world have involved North Korea’s resistance to the principles of monitoring, transparency, and reciprocity, and conditionality that the rest of the world has come to accept as a small price to be paid compared to the benefits of international cooperation. The willingness of North Korea’s leadership to accept these modes of interaction with the international community, with all the dangers that it may carry for survival of North Korea’s current ruling class, is the litmus test for progress in resolving the fundamental dilemmas posed by the North.

This paper will review the challenges North Korea has faced in managing the nuclear issue, the food crisis, economic reform and opening, and refugee/abduction issues as a vehicle for illustrating the extent to which transparency-related issues are perceived to represent a fundamental threat to the survival of North Korea’s leadership, and thus an enduring dilemma for both North Korea’s leaders and the international community.
North Korea's Ideological Aversion to Transparency

Although the DPRK was founded by Kim Il Sung with Soviet support on Marxist-Leninist revolutionary socialist principles, North Korea has proven to be a profoundly traditional state. While the DPRK has adopted methods of political organization both from the Japanese colonial period and from Soviet influence and has borrowed and expanded on Mao’s cult of personality for its own legitimation purposes, a strictly observed social hierarchy based on political loyalties reinforces a corporatist social and political culture more reminiscent of the nineteenth century than the twenty-first century. The development of juche ideology as a gradual replacement for Marxism-Leninism provided a basis for legitimation that attempted to break North Korean ties of dependency on external actors by emphasizing the autonomy of North Korea’s leadership. The juche philosophy, more than building on Marxist-Leninist theories of revolution, placed Kim Il Sung at the center of the universe and made Kim the subject rather than the object of history, both inside North Korea and in the context of North Korea’s international relations. Juche thought both promoted xenophobia as a response to the outside world and ensured that international actors, to the extent that they entered into the North Korean narrative, were supplicants to Kim Il Sung, bringing gifts to honor Kim and promoting Kim’s status as an actor of central significance on the international stage.

Several patterns that have characterized North Korea’s interactions with the international community have derived from this philosophical approach by the North that places the DPRK at the center of history rather than on the periphery. Despite the fact that many of these themes have been unsustainable in practice, they have remained the dominant framework through which the DPRK views its external interactions. First, North Korea’s preferred international strategies are unilateral in nature. The DPRK seeks its own interests to the extent possible without considering international cooperation as a necessity. Second, to the extent that international interactions are necessary, they are almost always cast as requests by the external actor to the North Korean leader or as symbols of international recognition that reinforce the legitimacy of the North Korean regime. Third, if North Korea is the subject of international interaction rather than the
object, reciprocity is unnecessary because the other parties actions are being taken in its own interests or in recognition of the intrinsic value of the importance of the DPRK. Likewise, gifts or aid to North Korea do not necessarily require North Korea to reciprocate with measures to satisfy the giver. Fourth, conditions on economic assistance or humanitarian or other aid to North Korea represent unjustified imperialist attempts to humiliate and subjugate, and should thus be rejected or accepted only on a temporary basis. Transparency, monitoring, conditionality, and reciprocity are concepts that directly challenge the legitimacy of the North Korean leadership.

From this perspective, North Korea has a right to take, but little obligation to give in return, and international expectations of reciprocity, transparency, or monitoring rights constitute humiliating violations of North Korean sovereignty. Thus, the North Korean approach to reform and opening to the outside world in the economic and political spheres since the early 1990s has accepted the need for economic reform so as to enhance the DPRK’s ability to extract resources necessary to the North’s efficiency and survival, but has strongly resisted reciprocity, monitoring, and enhanced transparency as political threats that risk undermining the North’s unique political order. However, in certain cases, the DPRK has conceded monitoring and verification—for a price. In every aspect of North Korea’s interaction with the international community over the course of the past two decades, North Korea’s inability to live in isolation and its needs for external assistance have come into contradiction with fears that the external light shed on North Korean politics and society will confront and dissolve the internally constructed pillars upon which the leadership has made the basis for its own legitimacy. To the extent that the international community has found the management of its relations with North Korea particularly difficult on issues involving transparency and reciprocity, these problems arise because those issues are viewed as direct threats to North Korea’s regime legitimacy and regime survival. We will examine the issue of transparency as a stumbling block in North Korea’s interaction with the international community in four spheres: 1) the North Korean nuclear issue, 2) humanitarian assistance to North Korea, 3) North Korean economic reform and opening, 4) North Korea’s handling of refugee and abduction issues.
1) North Korean nuclear issue

The history of North Korea’s nuclear program and of crises centered on North Korea’s resistance to compliance with IAEA demands for transparency, monitoring, and verification of North Korea’s nuclear development efforts is well-known. After the Soviets provided technology for the construction of an experimental nuclear reactor in North Korea in the 1980s, the United States asked the Soviets to pressure the North Koreans into signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), in 1985. However, a variety of technical and clerical errors delayed North Korea’s acceptance of inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) until 1992, at which point the DPRK joined the IAEA, submitted a declaration of its nuclear-related facilities, and allowed international inspections. The North Korean decision to allow IAEA inspections was most likely premised on a judgment that such inspections would not hinder the continued development of its nuclear program.

During the course of those inspections in the summer and fall of 1992, information gained during the inspections regarding the operation of a 5 megawatt reactor at Yongbyun surfaced that contradicted the North Korean declaration. These contradictions represented a setback to North Korea’s acceptance of international monitoring and resulted in a major crisis between the DPRK and IAEA. Ultimately, the crisis was settled through a bilateral negotiation between the DPRK and the United States that produced the Geneva Agreed Framework (GAF). Throughout this period, the DPRK resisted calls for “special inspections” by the IAEA designed to settle the discrepancies between North Korea’s declaration and the evidence discovered by IAEA inspectors regarding past production of plutonium. The initial crisis arose in part from North Korea’s inexperience with and resistance to international verification procedures that had been adopted by the IAEA as part of routine inspections procedures. But the IAEA’s inspectors also

---

stimulated a crisis over whether or not the DPRK would submit to procedures above and
beyond what had been customary as part of a routine inspections process and by DPRK
concerns that the IAEA had utilized U.S. intelligence information as a basis upon which
to pursue special inspections. The crisis itself and illustrated the resistance that the North
Koreans have held toward international inspections.

The Agreed Framework called for the DPRK to accept the presence of IAEA inspectors,
but under severely constrained conditions. Inspectors were allowed only at the site of the
Yongbyon reactor to monitor the storage of fuel rods removed from the 5 megawatt
reactor, but did not have independent privileges to monitor any other aspects of North
Korea’s nuclear program. The situation stipulated in the Agreed Framework was actually
more constrained than the normal scope of IAEA inspections in other countries. This
limited monitoring arrangement may have provided a symbolic peace of mind that the
North had indeed accepted limited presence of the IAEA in North Korea, but under
severely restricted conditions. It was clearly unable to prevent the DPRK from pursuing
a covert plan to develop uranium enrichment as an alternative path to gaining the bomb.

The Keumchang-ri incident, in U.S. intelligence regarding a suspected covert North
Korean nuclear development effort in 1998-99 again highlighted North Korea’s
resistance to the idea of international inspections of its facilities. The DPRK eventually
complied with U.S. demands for inspections of the suspected nuclear site at Keumchang-
ri following protracted negotiations, but for a substantial price. The U.S. inspections,
when they were finally allowed, turned up no evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the
North. The manner in which this incident was handled reinforced a new precedent in
managing of inspections with the North; namely, that the DPRK would allow special
inspections of its facilities—for the right price. Part of the arrangement that opened the
way for the United States to conduct inspections at Keumchang-ri was a U.S. pledge to
deliver hundreds of thousands of tons of food aid to North Korea.

The North Korean view on inspections has been expressed over the years in evocative
terms in Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) reports that “the United States insists that
we take off our clothes until we get stark naked, while it refuses to move even one step.”

Based on its prior experience, the DPRK did not oppose inspections as long as there was compensation and reciprocity by the United States in addressing the issues in dispute.

The future of the February 13, 2007, implementing agreement at the six party talks will also hinge on issues of verification and transparency. In contrast to the Keumchang-ri incident, in which the United States pursued verification in an adversarial context based on known suspicions, the cooperative verification process currently being implemented requires the North to once again make a voluntary declaration regarding its nuclear facilities and accept international inspections. In this sense, the currently envisioned process resembles the process that developed in 1992, when the North Koreans made their initial declaration to the IAEA as part of a cooperative process of verification. Whether or not that process turns adversarial will depend in part on the comprehensiveness of the North’s declaration and in part on how the international community handles discrepancies between the North’s declaration and any information that might contradict the declaration.

Although acceptance of IAEA verification procedures is a standard part of international obligations as NPT members, the North is demanding a reciprocal set of actions from the United States—in the case of the February 13th implementing agreement, a “reward” for the North’s decision to “shut down” and eventually “disable” its nuclear facilities. For instance, the North has requested that the United States change its “hostile policy” toward North Korea, and the Joint Statement imputes parallel processes toward the commonly-agreed objectives of denuclearization, normalization, economic assistance for North Korea, and the establishment of a permanent peace mechanism on the Korean peninsula. This process suggests that North Korea’s willingness to accept verification and monitoring obligations from the international community can only be gained at the price of assurances that North Korea’s larger concerns about regime survival be addressed through the process. A review of North Korea’s experience with verification shows that

---
North Korea has moved partially to accept principles of monitoring and verification, but maintains a strict assessment of relative costs and benefits accrued from international cooperation.

2) Humanitarian food assistance and monitoring in North Korea

A long-running dispute has existed between North Korea and the international community over issues related to humanitarian access and monitoring of food assistance delivered to the North since the beginning of international humanitarian work in North Korea in 1996. Upon their arrival in the DPRK, international humanitarian workers discovered a working environment quite unlike that which characterizes most humanitarian disasters, in which food crises have developed as a result of a collapse in the political order. In North Korea, the political authorities remained in place and assisted in the humanitarian effort while also imposing restrictions on international access that severely limited the capacity of international organizations to independently confirm that food assistance was delivered to recipient target groups.

DPRK government requirements that international monitors not speak Korean language and that up to one week advance be given to requests for monitoring trips outside of Pyongyang severely compromised the international humanitarian effort and severely restricted the activities of food monitors, who became dependent on handlers assigned from the government sponsored Food Damage and Rehabilitation Committee to do their work. Unannounced visits to recipient institutions were not allowed. In addition, most aid was channeled through the DPRK government’s Public Distribution System (PDS), an effective way of distributing aid, but one that reinforced the DPRK government’s own prioritization of need to institutions of its own choosing in the absence of direct access necessary to determine independently which segments of North Korean society were truly vulnerable. Given the constraints on monitoring in the DPRK, gradual efforts were

---

made to deliver items that were resistant to diversion, targeted to at risk communities in regions farther from the capital, and responsive to needy sectors of the population with special nutritional needs such as children and nursing mothers.

Several NGOs such as Medicins Sans Frontieres, Medicins du Monde, Action contre la Faim, and Oxfam, determined in the years between 1998 and 2000 that there was inadequate “humanitarian space” for them to conduct their work in North Korea and opted to abandon the mission. These conflicts were most severe in the case of medical missions in which humanitarian workers expected to come into direct contact with end users, while the DPRK government seemed particularly wary of allowing such contact, preferring to allow monitoring and assistance at the institutional level but to minimize unmonitored direct contact between aid workers and individual DPRK citizens. However, other members of the humanitarian community opted to continue their work and made efforts to improve conditions through quiet negotiations with DPRK counterparts on improved access, monitoring, and evaluation, and by shifting the programmatic from humanitarian aid delivery to development projects in areas such as water and sanitation that required less direct contact with individual North Koreans but would still improve the quality of life of the local populations.

In response to these withdrawals, the humanitarian aid community in North Korea attempted to negotiate an improved environment for their work and established a set of humanitarian principles for work in North Korea. Based on this document, which emphasized the importance of proper needs assessment, access, monitoring, and evaluation, and principles for distribution of international aid, the international agencies attempted to negotiate an improvement in the conditions under which they attempted to fulfill their humanitarian mission in North Korea. Improvements in access within the DPRK were gradual and hard-won; many of these improvements came about as a result of enhanced experience and understanding of individual FDRC members regarding how to effectively work with humanitarian aid workers while also fulfilling their mission of guarding the monitors so as to limit contact with North Korean society at the individual level.
The DPRK government remained particularly sensitive regarding independent data collection efforts that might have been used to more effectively respond to public needs. For instance, the DPRK government resisted international efforts by UN organizations to conduct health and nutritional surveys that are standard practice in other humanitarian crises. The DPRK did allow a limited nutritional survey in 1998, but limited the sample population surveyed. However, the publication of the survey results by the UNDP further antagonized North Korean authorities, who routinely limited dissemination of such data as a national secret. After protracted negotiations, a second survey including a broader population was conducted in 2001 that showed limited nutritional improvements within the DPRK, but this survey also was conducted under constrained circumstances.

Following the height of the food crisis in 1996-1998, the DPRK allowed the UN WFP to remain in the North, where it grew to become one of the WFP’s largest operations in the world. The DPRK apparently calculated during this period of recovery that the benefits derived from external assistance to meet a structural shortfall in food production compared to the overall need within the country offset the risks of intrusion under the established monitoring regime. Although the WFP continued to push for expanded access and maintained a principle of providing assistance only in areas where access was granted, the DPRK never allowed one hundred percent access to all counties in the North.

As the overall situation in North Korea began to improve, the DPRK resisted efforts to expand monitoring and imposed some geographical restrictions on the scope of access of NGOs operating in the North. US AID efforts to link expanded monitoring access to expanded provisions of assistance beyond a minimum of 50,000 tons pledged in 2005 failed to elicit a response from the North, which preferred to forgo expanded assistance rather than allowing the establishment of a more intrusive monitoring regime.\(^5\)

As the level of the WFP’s support began to decline or be replaced by other sources of external support such as assistance from the ROK and PRC governments, the WFP found itself under renewed pressure from North Korea. In the fall of 2005, the DPRK declared that it would no longer be needing assistance from WFP and that it desired to transition from humanitarian to development assistance. Subsequent negotiations with the DPRK allowed the WFP to stay in North Korea, but with a smaller anticipated contribution to North Korea’s food needs and under a constrained scope of monitoring and operations proportionate to the smaller contribution. Under a revised agreement signed on May 10, 2006, the scope of the WFP work was dramatically constrained from a program that reached 15.5 million people with 940,000 metric tons of food aid in 160 counties in 2005 to one that aimed to provide 150,000 metric tons of food aid to 1.9 million North Koreans in up to 50 counties through 2007. Moreover, under the new agreement five WFP field offices were closed and in-country travel plans are required to be submitted two weeks in advance, with field visits to pediatric wards and county hospitals not permitted. This adjustment in conditions on WFP presence represents a step backward from the monitoring regime accepted by the DPRK at the height of the crisis and eases the demand on DPRK officials charged with monitoring the monitors inside North Korea.

Renewed food shortages in early 2008 again stimulated DPRK appeals for food assistance to the WFP and the United States. In accordance with the severity of North Korean needs, the DPRK showed flexibility in negotiating a more intrusive regime for monitoring food assistance with the WFP and in allowing the renewal of direct delivery of assistance from the United States to be monitored by American NGOs. The outcome of the negotiation allows for spot inspections and for the inclusion of Korean speakers, but it remains to be seen how such an agreement will be implemented in practice. Although the new agreement represents an improvement, it does not yet meet the

---

international standards for monitoring that the WFP has adapted in other crisis response situations.

The international experience with monitoring of humanitarian aid inside North Korea illustrates the DPRK consistent resistance to international standards of monitoring and access, especially where it involved possibilities for access to the end user. As the DPRK’s relative need lessened and alternative sources came on line, the DPRK appears to have conducted its own cost-benefit analysis of the extent of assistance necessary and the price the DPRK would be willing to pay in terms of the intrusiveness of a monitoring regime. In the context of the DPRK’s recovery, U.S. AID efforts to condition expanded assistance on improved access have failed and the renegotiation of the scope and conditions under which WFP continues its operation in North Korea have been further constrained, while the DPRK has consistently failed to accept minimum international standards for monitoring of humanitarian assistance.

3) Economic Reform and DPRK’s Rejection of Conditionality

The DPRK’s insistence on protecting sovereignty at the expense of international cooperation has posed a major obstacle to North Korean prospects for pursuing economic reform and opening. North Korea prides itself on its self-reliance and has rejected conditions for receiving international financial assistance for reforms as a threat to its sovereignty. One early result of DPRK unwillingness to accept the rules of the game in international finance was that following a binge in international purchases in the mid-1970s, the North defaulted on the loans. This history has severely restricted North Korea’s access to international financing and remains a major obstacle to renewed assistance even today.

Since the early 1990s, the DPRK has intermittently explored options for economic opening to the outside world, including the establishment of special economic zones to promote international trade. However, these zones were initially established without an adequate understanding of the criteria that would be effective in attracting international
investors to participate in the zones. Most importantly, the DPRK has never taken practical measures to assure potential investors that the rules established for economic zones will be honored over political considerations or that it would be possible for international investors to actually make money by investing in the zones. Given the poor track record and lack of experience of international investors in the DPRK, there is a great need for a “demonstration project” through which outside investors can see that it is possible for external actors to earn and repatriate profits made in the DPRK. But given the overarching role of politics in the DPRK as a factor that almost always supersedes the rule of law, it has thus far been difficult for the DPRK to attract international interest in special economic zones.

The Rajin-Sonbong area was touted in the early 1990s as part of an ambitious UN-backed Tumen River Area Development Project, but the scale and time frame of the project were too grand and there rival conceptions within the region regarding how the project would be organized. A 1996 effort to reignite this effort was overshadowed by North Korean submarine incursions into South Korean territorial waters and the advent of the North Korean famine. An effort in 2001 to establish a special economic zone at Sinuiju, near the border with China, was marred by North Korea’s selection of Yang Bin, a Chinese entrepreneur with a shady background as the manager over China’s objections. Yang was arrested and tried for corruption shortly after being named as the head of the zone.

The latest and most ambitious effort to promote an economic zone in North Korea is the Hyundai-led Kaesong Industrial Complex, located just North of the DMZ and launched with strong backing from the ROK government. Thus far, South Korean government investment in infrastructure and support for private investment has attracted a few companies, but frustrations continue to exist over selection of the North Korean workforce, arbitrary North Korean fines and other demands for payment, and questions over how much of the labor fees are kept by the DPRK government and how much of the fee goes to the workers themselves. Nonetheless, South Korean proponents defend the project as an important laboratory for North Koreans to learn about the capitalist system and work practices. But the corresponding North Korean justification for the project may
be that the price of entry is high, the effects of the Kaesong project itself are containable, and the broader impact on North Korean society remains limited and manageable.

One of the biggest obstacles to North Korea’s economic opening remains the security stand-off with the United States, but even if that problem can be resolved, the North’s unwillingness to open key economic institutions or to share information with the international community is a fundamental constraint that limits prospects for North Korea’s integration with the international financial institutions (IFIs). Assuming that American and Japanese objections to membership in the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Asian Monetary Fund were to vanish, the standard international practice of such institutions requires a level of transparency and conditionality that the DPRK has thus far not shown a willingness to satisfy. For instance, the DPRK does not routinely make available statistics about the North Korean economy to international institutions, instead regarding such information as a state secret. But such information is an essential prerequisite for North Korea to receive international grants or loans from the international community beyond humanitarian assistance.

The DPRK has expressed interest in joining the IFIs in the late 1990s, sending a letter to the ADB expressing interest in membership in 1997 and inviting delegations from the IMF and World Bank to visit the DPRK in 1998. However, the DPRK was reluctant to share basic economic information with outside counterparts, either because they did not have the information or because they were reluctant to share it. Despite a variety of efforts to engage North Korean counterparts in further discussions on how to develop a relationship with the IFIs, North Korean specialists have not yet been able to take advantage of educational exchange opportunities at a scale sufficient to promote effective dialogue and cooperation. But the conditions that IFIs require as a prerequisite for establishing membership will pose a stiff challenge to North Korean conceptions of sovereignty and may stimulate longstanding North Korean distrust of the intentions of

---

international economic institutions. Moreover, despite the fact that DPRK capacity to absorb loans and development assistance is quite limited it is likely that the DPRK will be disappointed with the level of loans and grants available to it in the initial stages of the program, especially compared to the requirements that will be imposed as conditions for making such loan. DPRK willingness to begin the steps necessary to develop a relationship with the IFIs is an early litmus test of what may be possible at a later stage. All these factors constitute major challenges to the establishment of a relationship with the IFIs even if current political obstacles are removed. In fact, it is likely that the DPRK will attempt to utilize politics as a vehicle for putting pressure on IFIs to “bend the rules” in order to provide special accommodation to the DPRK.

The latest evidence for the difficulty of managing the separation of economics and politics when it comes to economic opening matters relates to the dispute between the DPRK and the United States over the U.S. Treasury’s advisory regarding the Banco Delta Asia (BDA) as a possible haven for North Korean counterfeiting and money laundering. As part of the resumption of the six party talks, a series of bilateral discussions were held to address the BDA issue and the extent to which counterfeiting and money laundering activities have hurt the DPRK’s reputation. Instead, the DPRK has interpreted its reduced access to international financial markets as a political matter driven by hostile actions led by the U.S. Treasury, and has focused more on recovering funds frozen at BDA than on the benefits to be derived from enhancing its reputation as a customer in good standing in the international community. Such actions suggest that the DPRK still believes that it can make and break international rules rather than accepting and abiding by them.

4) The abduction/refugee/human rights issue and North Korean transparency

The latest transparency issue that constitutes a perceived challenge to North Korean sovereignty is the set of issues deriving from North Korean refugee flows in combination with the rise of the abduction issue as a challenge for the DPRK’s relations with Japan. These issues pose a particularly vexing challenge in the context of evolving international
norms on human rights and the failure of the North to maintain the isolation that had protected the DPRK from international criticism regarding the nature of its system. North Korea’s relative isolation preserved it from serious scrutiny during the cold war. The lack of credible witnesses and the ongoing competition for legitimacy between North and South Korea obscured the realities of life inside North Korea and made verifiable evidence of North Korean human rights violations or abductions from Japan hard to come by. However, the famine of the mid-1990s also released refugee flows as the North Korean authorities were no longer able to seal their own borders. The resulting flow of refugees revealed not only the severity of famine conditions inside North Korea, but spread testimonies of gulags, abductions, and severe human rights abuses endemic to the nature of North Korea’s political system. Moreover, technological advances forced transparency onto North Korea in new ways. Not only could satellite imaging expose the severity of North Korea’s famine and make possible estimates of North Korean grain production and shortfalls, but remote sensing technologies could also expose and verify refugee testimonies regarding political prison camps in North Korea. These new developments posed an unprecedented direct challenge to North Korea’s sovereignty. It has enhanced international criticism of and pressure on the DPRK leadership and system.

The DPRK has long imposed strict controls on the internal movement of its own citizens, and DPRK law regards unauthorized travel outside of the country as a political offense. The loss of control of citizen movement as a result of the famine constituted a serious blow to the political power of the DPRK state, and has resulted in greater international scrutiny and criticism of the DPRK system. As refugees departed and found their way to Seoul, they provided credible information regarding the nature of the DPRK system and practices that previously had been rumored but could not easily be verified. Multiple testimonies from defectors, later backed by concrete evidence from satellite and undercover video smuggled outside the country, has served to verify human-rights related information and make possible new reporting on the human rights situation in North Korea that could not be documented previously due to lack of evidence. These stories

---

have gradually led to increasingly strong international condemnation of North Korea’s human rights practices, evoking a strong reaction from the DPRK. These new pressures pose an internal challenge to the political leadership of the DPRK because they also expose leadership practices to greater external scrutiny and spread rumors that challenge the leadership’s internal legitimacy.

Likewise, the rise of the abduction issue in Japan has been fueled in part by confirmations of the situation from testimony of North Korean refugees. Ironically, however, the Japanese public focus on the abduction issue was also abetted by an unprecedented step in the direction of transparency on the part of Kim Jong Il himself in a summit meeting with Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi on September 17, 2002. At that meeting, Kim Jong Il admitted that there had been abductions of Japanese nationals to North Korea in the past by concerned agencies, allowed four Japanese abductees to return to Japan temporarily with Prime Minister Koizumi, and gave an accounting regarding at least thirteen Japanese nationals who had been abducted to the North. The release of the abductees to Japan stimulated a media firestorm and massive coverage of the issue upon their return to Japan with Prime Minister Koizumi. Rather than being pleased at the unprecedented progress toward transparency by the North in handling this issue, the confirmation that abducted Japanese nationals were still alive in North Korea only stimulated greater public concern about the issue. In addition, the North Koreans gave information on the status of some Japanese nationals who were not on the Japanese list, stimulating doubts about scores of other missing persons cases in Japan and whether those individuals had also been abducted to North Korea. The result was that the North Korean effort to provide greater transparency also yielded suspicions in Japan regarding the veracity of the information the North Koreans provided. Families of abductees whom the North Koreans reported as dead continued their campaign, and the abduction issue has become firmly entrenched as the central issue in the Japan-DPRK relationship. Moreover, Kim Jong Il’s decision to enhance transparency regarding the abductees has directly contributed to the stalemate, reinforcing North Korean perceptions that transparency poses a danger to the sovereignty and legitimacy of the North Korean leadership.
Steadily increasing flows of refugees from North Korea do not themselves pose such a direct threat to the North Korean leadership, but the continued freedom of movement stimulates information flows into and out of North Korea that are bound to have a direct impact on the political control of the DPRK leadership. Increasingly, DPRK citizens are able to gain information regarding the outside world that plants seeds of doubt about the legitimacy of their own leadership. South Korean and Chinese videos circulate on the North Korean black market, further challenging the integrity of political control within North Korean society despite ever-increasing efforts on the part of the Korean Workers’ Party to reimpose discipline among cadres. But people flows and information flows exemplified by the continuing trickle of North Korean refugees to South Korea, and the fact that money has penetrated North Korean society to the extent that brokers can now bring family members of refugees to South Korea out of the North for the right price. These trends constitute perhaps fatal challenges to political control in the North.

Conclusion

This paper has posited that the enduring dilemma for the DPRK in dealings with the international community has been the unwillingness to accept the trade-offs in sovereignty that are required to accommodate international cooperation, instead preferring the isolation that is regarded as essential to the integrity of the North’s political system. Although the DPRK has begrudgingly accepted the necessity of some significant sacrifices in its own sovereignty in order to allow limited international verification of its nuclear program or monitoring of the delivery of international food assistance, those accommodations were usually made in return for essential tangible rewards and were regarded as limited or temporary concessions not as new precedents for the DPRK’s interaction with the international community. For the outside world, the dilemma is that the DPRK refuses to accept international standards as the basis for cooperation due both to perceived external security threats from the United States and internal security threats to the political integrity of the political leadership under the system that has been in place since the founding of the DPRK.
In the DPRK’s management of its relations with the international community, an outmoded nineteenth century concept of sovereignty continues to conflict with trends of integration and globalization that have been accepted as international norms by the rest of the world. The DPRK inclination to place politics above all contradicts the primacy of rule-based interactions in ways that will continue to pose severe difficulties for the integration of the DPRK system in its current form with the international community.

However, the greatest threats to DPRK sovereignty derive from challenges that threaten the internal control of the DPRK political leadership as its overarching role within the society continues to shrink. The transition from the PDS to a market-based system was the first step in the reduction of the role of the state in North Korean society. Increased flows of information and cultural products from the outside world pose an additional threat to rigid political control. The capacity of the North Korean leadership to adapt to these changes and to maintain control of the pace of change within North Korean society will determine how long the current leadership can survive. Without adaptation and reform, the system can not survive, but opening may carry with it the seeds of the current leadership’s own demise. This critical existential dilemma for North Korea’s leadership that has shaped its interactions with the international community; only with the resolution of that dilemma will it be possible for North Korea to more effectively integrate itself in Northeast Asia and the global community.