

Geir Helgesen and Hatla Thelle, *Dialogue with North Korea? Preconditions for Talking Human Rights With a Hermit Kingdom* (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies: Asia Insights #4), Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2013, 152 pp. ISBN: 978-8776941260 (paperback).

How the international community can effectively engage North Korea is a long-standing question with no worldwide consensus. The debate was rekindled recently by Brian Myers, a historian on North Korea and author of the book, *The Cleanest Race*. Myers argued that previous efforts to engage and change the thinking of (or 'to subvert' as he says) North Koreans has hardly succeeded; rather, the engagers can be 'subverted' by naively falling for the facade of good intentions and friendliness put up by their North Korean counterparts. His claim instantly met with outcry from those who have worked inside the country, such as James Hoare, former British chargé d'affaires in Pyongyang, and Erich Weingartner, who chaired an alliance of famine relief programs by non-governmental organizations in the late 1990s. They criticized Myers for ignoring the plurality of reasons for being and working inside the country, and instead treating all such activities as no different from Dennis Rodman's trip.

In light of this controversy, *Dialogue with North Korea* finds itself in a non-neutral stance—probably on the 'subversive' side according to Myers. The two authors have much to contribute. Geir Helgesen is director of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies and a cultural sociologist who specializes in the two Koreas. Hatla Thelle is senior researcher at the Danish Institute of Human Rights who has been engaged in research and project cooperation on human rights in China since 1997. In the prologue, the authors state that they want to propose an alternative approach to address North Korean human rights topics, one that is different from the currently prevailing approach involving naming-and-shaming and punitive measures such as sanctions.

In the first chapter, the authors explain North Korea's culture and history of nation building and assist readers in understanding how the regime's self-isolation from the world and national unity under the family leadership are interlinked and justified via political socialization of citizens. Then they discuss North Korea's interaction with the United Nations' human rights mechanism. To the surprise of many, the country has ratified four out of six core UN human rights conventions but has rarely carried out its obligations. The government does not provide official reasons, but the authors reckon that fulfilling the obligation of

writing an annual report to the signed treaty body costs much time and human resources and is therefore very demanding for countries such as North Korea.

Given this state of affairs, the authors ask, what are realistic and unrealistic parameters to engage such a difficult state in a human rights dialogue? They seek relevant insights from the experience of the European Union (EU)-China human rights dialogues as well as reflections from their field visit to North Korea in 2010. North Korea, like China, shows mistrust in a human rights dialogue. North Korean officials interviewed protest that the annual adoption of UN resolutions condemning North Korea's human rights situation and subsequent economic sanctions are proof of hidden political agendas advanced by hostile states such as the United States. Nonetheless, the informants speak of their interest in cooperating with foreign actors on less sensitive rights issues centred around improving the country's food and energy security. In conclusion, the authors emphasize the importance of low-profile engagement and restoring North Korea's faith in a human rights dialogue by focusing on less sensitive, development-oriented topics. In the grand scheme of international politics, they propose that cooperation and dialogue are more effective in facilitating meaningful changes in North Korea than confrontation and isolation.

The aforementioned arguments are not entirely novel, but the authors' personal communications with North Korean bureaucrats offer food for thought. These stories have often been overshadowed by the aggregate image of North Korea as a unitary, evil-minded entity. One interview reveals the generational divide among the government officials; the younger generation is reportedly more willing to face human rights discussions raised by the international community, though so far silenced by old guards in power (p. 37). A few other informants also shed light on the lack of coordination among different industries, regions and government departments regarding economic planning, which hampers economic development, contrary to what the government says to its people (p. 97). These rather candid accounts should not be overstretched as if to suggest that the North Korean regime is soon to take on political liberalization. Nonetheless, these individual stories are like small cracks to peep inside the hermit kingdom, and even the critics of engagement would value highly such insider information.

The authors' claims could have been more convincing had they considered political factors more in depth. At times, the authors use cultural arguments too generously. For example, China's attempts to

avoid international criticism are explained as the Confucian practice of saving one's face from disgrace, a lesson for the EU-DPRK human rights dialogue, if it happens (p. 69). This argument would be more convincing if evaluated against the political reasoning that the dialogue was not welcomed because the government feared losing internal legitimacy if domestic human rights problems became internationally known. In this respect, I would like to see a deeper analysis on what prevented the EU from further building China's trust in the process. It is possible that keeping the dialogue at the level of no more than a diplomatic event is to the benefit of the EU and helps maintain its progressive international image. To rephrase, the engaged party (China) as well as the half-hearted engaging party (EU) are responsible for making the human rights dialogue an unrealistic aspiration. By missing out the latter, the authors' analysis of the EU-China case remains descriptive and analytically inconclusive.

Despite the glitches, I confess I enjoyed this book, easily read yet occasionally punching above its weight. The authors not only provide a useful pair of lenses to understand North Korea's human rights behaviours but make bold claims that can feed into the ongoing debate on more effective approaches to North Korea. I am personally intrigued to hear Brian Myers' response.

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Debate-starter by Brian Myers: <http://www.nknews.org/2014/01/subverted-engagement/>

James Hoare's response: <http://38north.org/2014/03/jhoare031114/>

Erich Weingartner's response: <http://38north.org/2014/03/eweingartner031114/>