The human rights crisis in North Korea

In the past year, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), commonly referred to as North Korea, launched a long-range rocket; conducted its third nuclear test; nullified the 1953 Korean War armistice; withdrew all its workers from the Kaesong industrial park jointly run with South Korea; and threatened the U.S. and South Korea repeatedly with nuclear attacks.

In response, South Korea, the United States, China and the international community have tried to address the latest crisis. Those who are aware of the worst-case scenarios involving such powerful countries are understandably concerned.

However, the unruly behavior we have seen from Pyongyang is not new, but patterned. And, as we uncover more of the insidious negotiation strategy and goals of the DPRK, we become increasingly aware of systematic violations of human rights in North Korea, which represents an even more criminal, yet comparatively hidden crisis on the world stage. Heightening our collective awareness and sharing suggestions in response are the first steps toward playing a role in the future improvement of this ongoing North Korean crisis.

First, recognizing the ties between DPRK’s patterned acts, ideology and objectives is crucial for finding possible solutions. Scott Snyder, senior fellow for Korean Studies and director of the program on US-Korea Policy at the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, describes the North Korean negotiation strategy in five steps.

These steps include:

1) escalate the crisis; 2) use it to gain bargaining leverage to get the desired parties (most particularly the United States) to the table; 3) as a result of the crisis, to come to an agreement, which 4) endows North Korea with benefits, which it gladly devours; and then 5) not abide by its promises, break the agreement and create another crisis — thus starting this cycle again. This saber-rattling brinkmanship has yielded results for the DPRK at times, which perversely reinforces this negative pattern and has helped sustain this failed regime.

Understanding this pattern in the context of North Korea’s primary objectives is crucial. Hwang Jang-yop, the highest ranking official ever to defect from the DPRK, explained that the three principal goals of Pyongyang are: 1) eliminate the U.S. commitment to South Korea, which is why North Korea has repeatedly sought a peace treaty; 2) foster positive sentiment towards North Korea in South Korea and 3) violently reunify the peninsula through war.

Insight regarding these objectives crystallizes what may otherwise seem to be completely irrational actions and words. The burden of proof that these objectives have changed from this predominantly static country lies squarely upon the skeptics.

As critical as the DPRK security crisis is to the world, the impact of their adherence to such repressive tactics is sadly worsened by a litany of gross human rights violations. Despite the regime’s incessant attempts to paint a positive picture of their nation, there exists ample evidence that the DPRK egregiously violates the human rights of its people.

Although North Korea has officially signed onto four international human rights treaties (the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child) and even has nominal rights protections in its own constitution, North Korea has not abided by any of these legal obligations.

The North Korean people have no due process of law, no freedom of speech, live under the iron fist of their leader’s cult of personality, are imprisoned in prison camps for the smallest of “crimes,” have been religiously persecuted and have been exterminated, tortured and punished by collective retribution. These are just a few notable examples of the gross human rights violations prevalent in North Korea.

Human rights groups estimate that as many as 200,000 people are being held in North Korean prison camps in an endless attempt to crush all political dissent.

The human rights crisis in the DPRK deserves the same urgency of attention as the regime’s defiant saber-rattling. Unfortunately, the deep cries of these oppressed people are often obscured by the brinksmanship and the pattern of deceit, which has become emblematic of the North Korean government.

Though the security concerns in the region are legitimate and substantial, they should not be allowed to completely overshadow the worst human rights crisis in the world today. Today. To understand more of the social and economic drivers fueling the ruling powers in North Korea and to keep abreast of the world’s efforts to ensure the human rights of its people, go to nkdb.org/2012/main.php (North Korea Data Base) and thebearandthetiger.com to learn more.

BY MORSE TAN

Morse Tan teaches at Northern Illinois University College of Law and has published in law journals in his fields, including as one of the leading legal scholars on North Korea in the Western Hemisphere. He is working on a book with Routledge Press on security and human rights in North Korea.

Though the security concerns in the region are legitimate and substantial, they should not be allowed to completely overshadow the worst human rights crisis in the world today.