INTERVIEW

REACHING OUT TO 25 MILLION NORTH KOREAN PEOPLE

Interview with Sokeel Park

REACHING OUT TO 25 MILLION NORTH KOREAN PEOPLE

Interview with Sokeel Park

Sokeel Park is Director of Research & Strategy and South Korea Country Director at Liberty in North Korea (LiNK), an international NGO that rescues and resettles North Korean refugees. After completing a Bachelor in Psychology at the University of Warwick and an M.A. in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science, he has worked in the United Nations, the South Korean government and in diplomatic consultancy at Independent Diplomat. He regularly gives lectures about LiNK's operations and North Korean issues to an international audience.

The Journal's editor Diana Piscarac sat down with Sokeel Park to discuss LiNK's engagement with North Korean refugees, the current political developments, and changes affecting North Korean society.

Y: How did you become involved with Liberty in North Korea, and what does your current position as South Korea Country Director as well as Director of Research & Strategy entail?

SP: I first met staff of Liberty in North Korea and also North Koreans, who had become refugees and then resettled in South Korea and the United States, when I was in New York. I was there for my graduate internship at the United Nations headquarters, and I was also interested in North Korea and North Korean refugees, human rights and humanitarian issues. In terms of my role as South Korea country director, I oversee our South Korea operations. That includes some of the coordination and handling of the refugee rescue program, and also the resettlement and post-resettlement assistance for North Koreans after they come to South Korea, and also our efforts to engage with youth in South Korea, in order to inform, educate and help them develop not just understanding but empathy for North Korean people, to change the narrative. So that involves a lot of different efforts, online and offline. In terms of research and strategy, North Korea is a multi-faceted, complex and changing issue and we think we need not just secondary research, but also to develop our own

insights, information and analysis on what's happening on the issue, so that we can talk about it authoritatively and provide some new insights, especially from the North Koreans who are leaving the country. We try to learn from them, we see them as our teachers on the issue. We collate that, analyze it and then share it with the international community and with the media. Also develop our strategy as an organization, to be as effective as possible to support the North Korean people, and in the long term, working towards our vision, which is liberty in North Korea.

Y: Please tell us about your background and how it informs your current work.

SP: I include my studies in that. My undergraduate studies were in psychology and my master's is in international relations and international history. I think all of that informs my thinking and my analysis on these issues. It's relevant and useful in analyzing both what's happening inside North Korea and approaches and strategies to bring forward change and opening of the country.

Y: What are some of the challenges and rewards of doing human rights work?

SP: I don't necessarily consider myself to be a human rights activist. In human rights there is just one framework, of course it's important, but in terms of challenges and rewards, both come from the fact that this is a relatively small industry. There are not that many organizations and institutions focused on North Korea, which means there are not that many opportunities for people to get into it in the first place. However, and in there lie the rewards as well, it's kind of a niche market that brings a lot of opportunities. Another challenge is that it's a long term issue. Sometimes progress can be difficult to see and measure, on working towards the goal of liberty in North Korea, achieving and securing their freedom, and ultimately developing their country. But it's also rewarding to be able to see micro-level changes, from individual North Koreans, and in the long run, it's a massive privilege to be able to work on an issue that is of humanity scale importance. I think we're going to see a lot of change in North Korea and the Korean peninsula within our lifetime.

Y: During one of your open talks you mentioned the "emergence of shared disobedience" among the high-tech empowered North Korean millennials, sharing new information about the outside world. To what extent does the influence of the Jangmadang Generation permeate North Korean society?

SP: The North Korean population that grew up during and after the famine of the 1990s, and from an early age have been socialized into this new changing, opening North Korean economy and information environment, is obviously growing year by year; this is a long-term generational change. I think it is key in our analysis of not just North Korea, but authoritarian governments in general, that authoritarian leaders can't just rely on fear, they actually have to get some kind of support and legitimacy from the people. And what the Jangmadang generation represent in the way that they influence and will continue to influence North Korean politics, is that North Korean policy will need to become more economy-oriented, in order to accommodate this new generation, their desires, their values, their increased understanding of North Korea's economic backwardness and to maintain support from them. I think we have seen that throughout the Kim Jong-un administration, maybe even more so this year, with an even more strongly signposted pivot towards economic development and lowering the emphasis on national security. In the long run, it seems pretty clear that Kim Jong-un recognizes that he can't maintain control and power without having economic development, and partly that is because of the way the economy is restructured internally and the development of a capitalist mindset and market economy, but also the growing awareness of China and South Korea, and how far behind North Korea is. Therefore that sense of relative deprivation and understanding of the causes of that deprivation, that it is not just because of the weather or factors outside the government's control, but that the North Korean government is actually part of the problem. That presents some accountability. It's very indirect, but the North Korean policy elite, and Kim Jong-un, is sensitive to these changes inside the country, including the changes in the youth generation. There are policies that are aimed at the new generation, to bring them back into the "socialist revolution", and to reclaim their authority. Regarding "shared disobedience", there are no public voices dissenting against the government, there's no organized disobedience, but there is disorganized shared disobedience, including when people are gathering and watching South Korean media together and collaborating in very subversive behavior, outside of government control. That can be a gateway to having more subversive conversations, to sharing opinions, desires and influencing behavior.

Y: In view of the regional context, specifically China's rise, could the Chinese economic model be a suitable path for North Korea's economic development?

SP: North Korea will find its own model. We have different examples of transition from China, Vietnam, even Cuba and other places. China is the closest and easiest-to-learn model in a lot of ways. More North Koreans, in terms of people who officially travel, have been to China than to any other country, for obvious reasons, so it will be a strong model. But North Korean policy makers are active agents in making decisions to maybe model off some things, but reject others. At this stage, what we can say is, under Kim Jong-un there has been policy and legal innovations in the direction of liberalization, decollectivization, more local autonomy, basically accommodation of what had already become the reality of capitalism. It's a matter of time and exact pathway. For Kim Jong-un, his base priority is maintaining control and power, but recognizing that in order to maintain control and power for the long-term, he has to play a long game. I think he has come to a rational conclusion that North Korea needs economic development in order to maintain support from the people. At the end of the day it's 2018, and in order to really develop your economy effectively you need to allow Internet access to businesses and to people, and you need to have that kind of communication-information infrastructure, but that would present a challenge to Kim Jong-un's control and power. It seems that he knows he has to incorporate, basically, the liberalization of the economy. It's a matter of how far and how quickly he is willing to go with that. North Korean people will start to demand other things, not just white rice and meat, but more opportunities and freedoms.

Y: What are some of the ways that LiNK monitors and assesses the situation of human rights in North Korea?

SP: It's talking with North Koreans who have left the country, and we take an open, unstructured approach throughout our conversations with them. We recognize all of the caveats in that kind of research, and we also recognize that a lot of people are doing very systematic kind of work. I think that a lot can be gained from more open, less structured, less planned, less constrained conversations, where you just get the other person to start talking and a lot of it is on them to teach you what they know, rather than just asking specific questions that we may have. One example is asking people to describe their house, so very objective, what kind of electronic goods they have in their house

and if they say that they have a TV, what do you watch on TV, if they say they have a DVD player or a laptop, that is interesting, where did you get a laptop from, how much did that cost, and so on. It's allowing their answers to lead the conversation and keep it more open. It's more of a journalistic approach, where you're asking people questions to get their experiences and their views, in their words, in an open way, to thereby derive information about phenomena rather than to necessarily develop statistical knowledge on what's happening.

Y: Your rescue program has so far helped over 800 North Korean refugees and through your media campaigns some of their stories have reached people all over the world. What impact does this have on the human rights situation in the DPRK and discussions about the issue?

SP: The objective there is to build more support for North Korean refugees and North Korean people, more broadly. If that means that North Korean refugees get more help, whether that's through our organization or another organization, or if any organization or even governments, whichever actors implement more people-focused strategies, that can help the North Korean people and bring forward change and opening of North Korea as a country. One of the problems that we've had with the international community, was that we've dealt with North Korea through such a strong security framework, as a security problem, instead of dealing with it more holistically, as a country. The summit is coming up, so if we deal with Kim Jong-un we need to make sure that that deal doesn't just benefit him and doesn't just deal with the narrow security problems that grab the most attention, but are not necessarily the most fundamental. Then we're dealing with the symptom. So we need to make sure that our deals benefit the 25 million North Korean people, not just one North Korean person, Kim Jong-un. So pushing North Korea in the direction of change and opening, to be more economy-oriented instead of security-oriented, and in the long term, normalized in the international community. I don't think we can have a sustainable solution on all of these problems, including security, without North Korea opening and normalizing as a country. And so our approach needs to take that into account and include the North Korean people. It needs to start with the understanding of the internal situation, how things are already changing, and strategies designed to accelerate those forces of change inside the country. I think that North Korean people and those who have become refugees have entered into the picture more over the last few years, so we still need to humanize the North Korean people, and build more understanding and empathy for them, internationally but also in South Korea, where there

is a huge problem of not perceiving 25 million North Korean people. That's a result of historical legacy of the mutual isolation and the securitized framework through which South Korean society has approached North Korea, but that needs to change, and it's one of the things that we're working on, especially with young South Koreans.

Y: Two inter-Korean summits and an upcoming US-NK summit, in less than half a year. The recent developments seem to bring historical change on the Korean Peninsula. What is the potential impact of these events on the issue of North Korean refugees?

SP: I don't think it will have a predictable big effect on the North Korean refugees in the short-term. This is obviously playing out at high-level politics, and when we talk of North Korean refugees, that's very much ground-level, in terms of the reality on the ground in North Hamyeong and Yanggang provinces in particular, and the border between North Korea and China, and the general situation in China. In the long run, in terms of the bigger picture, I think that the summit policy can be a good thing, but it won't lead to denuclearization. But it can lead to a process that allows both North Korea and the US to model through the least worst scenario, where North Korea maintains some elements of its nuclear program, but the US also feels they have become a more reasonable, less threatening actor, without ever finally getting into denuclearization. This diplomatic engagement can be win-win. Win for the international community, win for Kim Jong-un, at least in the short to medium term, and also a win for the North Korean people. And I'll add that the more North Korea changes and opens up, becomes more oriented towards economic development instead of security and in the long run normalizes as a country, the more the internal situation changes, the more Kim Jong-un will be on track to play nicely with the international community, and the more leverage the international community will have with Kim Jong-un. Without that, the engagement would be on a very precarious, very weak footing, it will be easy to backslide.

Y: We could suddenly see a friendlier side of Kim Jong-un, in addition to more contact between North Koreans and the rest of the world during the Pyeongchang Olympics earlier this year. Do you think these events have changed the way the world looks at North Korea? Are these engagements relevant to the situation of the people in North Korea?

SP: I don't think these kind of PR moves and soft power plays from the North Korean government make much of a difference in the way the international community and public views North Korea. The view of North Korea is fairly fixed in terms of a weird, terrible dictatorship, so we don't need to worry too much about North Korean soft power. But those kind of soft power exercises and trade-offs are something that South Korea will win every single time. If North Korean musicians come to South Korea, some people might be interested because it's kind of novel, but it won't make that much of a difference. But if a lot of South Korean musicians go to North Korea, especially if it's consistent, that can actually change North Korean culture, change the way that North Korean people see South Korea. So South Korea has a massive advantage over North Korea in soft power. One concert or sport event won't change the game completely, but it's all cumulative, the more you do it, whether it's sporting exchanges, music, academic work, any kind of cultural exchange, the North Korean people will learn about South Korea and the outside world, and how backwards they are, how backwards they've been kept. One of the best things that could come out of this diplomacy which is already starting a little bit, and I'm pleased that Moon Jae-In has supported that kind of cultural interaction, is that we can unlock the engagement at the level of high politics, so that we can open up 'low politics,' grassroots, "people to people, society to society" track of engagement. It remains to be seen how much Kim Jong-un and the North Korean government will allow that track to grow, how much cultural exchange will be possible, but we have to push it to the limit to see what that limit is, and we shouldn't set our own limits on it. If we isolate the North Korean people from the outside world, then we play into their government's strategy and ideologies. Most of the isolation comes from the North Korean government itself, but we sometimes inadvertently support that.

Y: There has been much renewed talk about the reunification of the two Koreas, within the prevailing paradigm of politics and denuclearization. In view of LiNK's stated mission to change the narrative of how we look at North Korea, what are the major challenges you are facing?

SP: Maybe we can zoom down into the issue here in South Korea. The framework and the ideology around reunification is problematic to changing the narrative and to encouraging especially young South Koreans to think about North Korea in a different way. One of the issues with reunification is that it can lead to a framing of the problem of North Korea as the division of the Korean peninsula. The division of the Korean peninsula is of course the origin, the historical starting point of both the North Korean and South Korean states, but

it's not the fundamental problem now, into 2018. The fundamental problem is the governance of North Korea, that makes it the most closed, repressive, and ideologically governed country in the world. The reunification framework, the very strong keyword of "reunification,, that in South Korea is such a strong keyword, like you say North Korea and reunification comes right after. It's such a strong association in culture, political culture, and in people's minds. It leads to a sub-optimal framing of the problem itself, which is dealing with North Korea as a country, and then also leading to sub-optimal strategies for solving the issue. Because if the problem is division, then the solution is reconciliation. The other problem with reunification is that increasingly young people aren't interested in it. That creates problems because there's not an open, honest conversation around reunification. It kind of reminds me of the political conversation around the European Union and European integration in the UK, before Brexit became an issue. European integration was a given, there wasn't an open honest conversation about benefits and costs, it was just an agenda that was pushed by political elites without having an open conversation, that then obviously led to a disaster. Even if you want reunification, I think we should have a more open and honest, and healthy conversation about the benefits and potential costs of reunification. Within the discourse of reunification that young South Koreans feel increasingly detached from, there's a danger that there is not really a place for them, a role for them, they are not agents in this picture, they just wait and see what happens between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un. It's almost like a TV news drama, the same thing with Trump and Kim Jong-un. It's something that we need to work on, talk with young South Koreans. I have actually had very positive responses, when we present that kind of vision and talk about those kind of solutions, actually a lot of people are on board with it. So I do see a lot of hope there.