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Adaptive Activism
Transnational Advocacy Networks and the Case of North Korea

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The international community must accept its responsibility to protect the people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea from crimes against humanity, because the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has manifestly failed to do so.

*Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*¹

On March 21, 2013, the United Nations Human Rights Council established the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights (COI) was tasked to investigate “the systematic, widespread and grave violations of human rights in the DPRK, with a view to ensuring full accountability.”² One year later, the COI released its report. In a powerful statement, the Chair of the Commission declared that “the gravity, scale, duration and nature of the unspeakable atrocities committed in the country reveal a totalitarian state that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world.”³ The report found that these human rights violations “arise from policies at the highest level of the State” and amount to “ongoing crimes

¹ UN Human Rights Council 2014, sect. V.

² These findings include, but are not limited to: violations of the freedoms of thought, expression, and religion (where the state claims “an absolute monopoly over information and total control of organized social life”); violations of the right to food, stemming largely from discrimination, state restrictions on food aid delivery, and prioritization of resources toward military spending even in times of mass starvation; and arbitrary detention, torture, and execution, with people found guilty of political crimes “disappeared” into political prison camps where “the inmate population has been gradually eliminated through deliberate starvation, forced labor, executions, torture, rape and the denial of reproductive rights.” For the complete findings, see UN Human Rights Council 2014.

³ UN Human Rights Council 2014.

against humanity ... which our generation must tackle urgently and collectively.”⁴

The COI’s report, released in March 2014, marked an important juncture for North Korean human rights advocacy and represented the culmination of years of dedicated transnational advocacy on behalf of North Korean human rights. The most immediate effect of the COI report was the profile it gave the issue of North Korean human rights. Once a subject relegated to the sidelines and considered secondary to the important statecraft of security and nuclear diplomacy, the human rights situation in North Korea was broadcast to the world. There is now little doubt remaining as to the legitimacy of the claim that horrific violations take place inside the country on a daily basis.

While much has been revealed about human rights in North Korea, far less has been said about the advocacy networks that drew attention to the issue and helped bring about the COI in the first place. The COI report, which for the first time documented the full litany of human rights abuses carried out by the North Korean regime against its own people, was made possible on the back of decades of advocacy and research undertaken by a global network of dedicated human rights actors. The success these nonstate actors have had in raising this issue at the highest level of the United Nations (UN) is surprising because it has occurred without direct access to the North Korean state. As we discuss in this chapter, current scholarly models of how transnational activism works assume the existence of at least some local opposition movements working inside the country. Yet the North Korea case suggests that this is not, in fact, a necessary scope condition. Moving forward, current research into human rights change also points to the conclusion that local actors are necessary for lasting human rights change, but assumes that change is top down (that is, that change happens when states are responsive to international and domestic pressure). Yet despite the absence of domestic actors, North Korean human rights activists continue to pursue better outcomes in North Korea, and not always in the “top down” way we might expect. These observations thus raise two questions which animate this opening chapter, and indeed the other contributions in this volume. First, how does a transnational advocacy network emerge to push for change in a highly repressive context where there is no domestic opposition? And second, by what pathways might transnational activists create change in such contexts?

This volume turns the spotlight onto the work of those actors who have worked tirelessly to expose the human rights situation in North Korea. Human rights actors within the North Korean transnational advocacy network include

⁴ Kirby 2014.

domestic and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), government agencies, legislative bodies, foundations, think-tanks, churches and other religious organizations, journalists, scholars, students, and concerned citizens. The network therefore comprises individuals as well as organizations and coalition movements, which “form links across actors in civil societies, states, and international organizations, [multiplying] the channels of access to the international system.”⁵ Table 1.1 provides a small sample of actors within the North Korean human rights network.⁶

In this chapter, we explore the ways in which the case of North Korean human rights activism both confirms and challenges existing scholarship on transnational human rights activism, and the role advocacy networks play in the diffusion of human rights norms, discourse, and practice. In particular, we draw attention to the weaknesses with current models of human rights change and examine how state and nonstate actors challenge highly repressive regimes by investigating the quintessential “hard case” of North Korea. We proceed by first offering a brief review of existing models of transnational advocacy networks and human rights change and review their applicability to the task of understanding North Korean human rights advocacy. We then extrapolate three variables that we argue are critical to understanding the emergence and evolution of North Korean human rights activism: discourse, network dynamics, and defectors. Finally, we turn our attention to human rights outcomes, exploring the different mechanisms of change that link activism to outcomes. We conclude by recapping our theoretical aims and outlining what is to follow in the remaining chapters of this volume.

TRANSNATIONAL ADVOCACY NETWORKS, DOMESTIC OPPOSITION, AND THE CASE OF NORTH KOREA

Since the late 1990s, a large body of scholarship has explored the role played by transnational advocacy networks in world politics.⁷ Taken as a whole, this literature has been instrumental in documenting the ways in which nonstate actors have transformed outcomes on the world stage by wielding significant moral and ideational power. In bringing about new normative frameworks, as

⁵ Keck and Sikkink 1998, 1.

⁶ Table 1.1 only represents organizations working specifically on “human rights issues,” defined in terms of civil and political rights. When using a broader definition to include social and economic rights, other contributors also consider that humanitarian organizations fall under the scope of human rights. For example, see Chapter 2 by Reidhead.

⁷ See, for example, Keck and Sikkink 1998; Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002; Della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Busby 2010; Hadden 2015; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; 2013.

TABLE 1.1. *Sample of North Korean human rights organizational actors by country*

Actor	Country
Free NK Radio	South Korea (defector-led)
North Korea Freedom Coalition	USA
The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK)	USA
North Korea Intellectuals Solidarity	South Korea (defector-led)
PSCORE (People for Successful Corean Reunification)	South Korea
Liberty in North Korea (LiNK)	USA
Helping Hands Korea	South Korea
Justice for North Korea	South Korea
Life Funds for North Korean Refugees	Japan
The Council for Human Rights in North Korea (Canada)	Canada
North Korea Strategy Center	South Korea (defector-led)
Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights	South Korea
Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights	South Korea
Database Center for North Korean Human Rights	South Korea
European Alliance for Human Rights in North Korea	United Kingdom
All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea	United Kingdom
International Coalition to Stop Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea	South Korea / Transnational
Amnesty International	United Kingdom (Global)
Human Rights Watch	
United Nations Human Rights Council	United Nations (Global)
National Endowment for Democracy	USA
Radio Free Asia	USA

well as compelling adherence (behavioral changes) to international human rights norms, the outcomes achieved by the principled actors that make up these advocacy networks have been heralded as evidence that neither states nor nonstate actors simply act out of strategically determined self-interest, but that ideas and values matter in world politics.⁸

⁸ These conceptual claims can be found in the work of scholars from the same period. See, for example, Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner 1998; Price and Tannenwald 1996.

Keck and Sikkink's *Activists Beyond Borders* is often taken as the launching point for any discussion on transnational advocacy networks.⁹ Although the idea of “networks” is what draws many scholars to Keck and Sikkink's seminal work, their emphasis on “advocacy” is also of great relevance to the contributions in this volume. As Keck and Sikkink state, “advocacy captures what is unique about these transnational networks: they are organized to promote causes, principled ideas, and norms, and they involve individuals advocating policy changes that cannot be easily linked to a rationalist understanding of their ‘interests.’”¹⁰ Thus, the authors expose how transnational advocacy networks strategically wield resources and influence to transcend their material disadvantage vis-à-vis states and shift prevailing “structures of power and meaning.”¹¹

Perhaps Keck and Sikkink's most influential contribution to the study of transnational advocacy networks is the “boomerang pattern” of information flow and international pressure directed against a rights-violating regime. When opportunities between the state and domestic actors are blocked, and local activists and NGOs are thus unable to place direct pressure on their own governments, they reach out to international allies for support. These allies – be they international NGOs (INGOs), UN groups, other states, single-issue rights organizations, or individual actors – then work to raise global awareness and apply political leverage and outside pressure against the repressive, rights-violating state.¹² Beyond the boomerang pattern, Risse and Sikkink present a more dynamic “spiral model” of human rights change.¹³ This model, which we discuss in more detail in this chapter's final section on compliance issues, seeks to understand the broader processes of normative diffusion. Like the boomerang pattern, the spiral model places domestic activists at its center.¹⁴

On the surface, certain aspects of the boomerang pattern do bear out in the North Korean case, even in the absence of local dissident voices. Transnational advocacy networks have played a critical role in raising awareness, advocating, and lobbying on behalf of North Koreans who remain mostly powerless against a totalitarian state. As contributors to this volume describe (see chapters by Yeo [3], Arrington [4], Narayan [5], Hosaniak [6], and Chubb [8]), the North Korean human rights network has gained the support of significant actors, including the UN and the European Union

⁹ Keck and Sikkink 1998. We use other terms, including transnational movement, transnational advocacy group, or international campaign in reference to North Korean human rights activism. However, our thinking on activism in this volume resonates most closely with the transnational advocacy network concept.

¹⁰ Keck and Sikkink 1998, 8–9. ¹¹ Keck and Sikkink 1998, 23–5. See also Price 2003, 583.

¹² Keck and Sikkink 1998, 12–13. ¹³ Risse and Sikkink 1999. ¹⁴ Risse and Sikkink 1999, 5.

(EU); powerful states, such as the United States; and major NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

While some aspects of North Korean human rights activism appear to conform to existing models of transnational networks and human rights change, other attributes of the North Korean case suggest it is an outlier. First, no civil society or domestic opposition exists in North Korea.¹⁵ Both the boomerang pattern and the spiral model take domestic (or local) civil society as their starting points for transnational advocacy and human rights change. Yet even without local advocates, the North Korean human rights campaign has still achieved some success. How did this happen, and what does this tell us about the limitations of existing theory? To what degree do the models described above help us understand the North Korean human rights case? A core assumption is that a transnational network is activated (or at least enabled) by local actors providing vital information and legitimacy to actors outside the state. Domestic actors provide first-hand accounts and information about human rights violations. They alert transnational actors to the existence of abuse or strengthen and establish existing concerns. This, in turn, bolsters the legitimacy of the claims of the transnational network, rendering their advocacy more effective.¹⁶ In what ways, then, is the North Korean human rights case an outlier, requiring a modification of these models for highly repressive contexts, where it is difficult to gain verifiable information about human rights abuses and where local populations can neither challenge their own governments nor interact directly with the outside world?

Given that the dominant frameworks for human rights advocacy presuppose that local human rights activists (that is, grassroots movements inside the repressive state) play a legitimating role at the earliest stages of the model, how do we then account for the widespread acceptance of the claims made by North Korean human rights activists in the absence of any such locally based dissident actors? The argument that networks create a “transnational structure” for challenging norm-violating regimes from below and above, and “empower and legitimate”¹⁷ the claims of local activists against their own repressive regimes, appears less relevant in the North Korean context in the absence of any localized North Korean civil society. Yet, despite their absence, the transnational campaign has experienced impressive mobilizing capacity

¹⁵ While there are reports of North Koreans who privately criticize or speak ill of the regime, there is no evidence of mobilization or sustained collective action in North Korea. See also Joo 2014; Armstrong 2003; Tudor and Pearson 2015.

¹⁶ Risse and Sikkink 1999, 20. ¹⁷ Risse and Sikkink 1999, 5.

and a series of significant legislative outcomes at the domestic and international levels.

Second, and related to the above, the level of repression in North Korea is virtually unparalleled in the contemporary world.¹⁸ While other studies examine the validity of the spiral model in highly repressive contexts, very few of them address a state like North Korea where the local population remains completely isolated from the outside world.¹⁹ Schwarz goes so far as to argue that in repressive, totalitarian settings where citizens are not granted political rights, there is little value to be gained from using models of human rights change: “the analysis of totalitarian regimes seems to offer little benefit since by definition little or no respect for human rights can be expected.”²⁰ As Jetschke and Liese discuss in their review of the original spiral model, in cases of severe repression, authoritarian governments have proven successful in limiting the opening of domestic opportunity structures and preventing the strengthening of networks between domestic and transnational civil society.²¹ As such, this is a quintessential “hard case” test of the spiral model.

In the wake of severe repression and the absence of any visible civil society, the evidence offered by contributors to this volume, and outlined further in this chapter’s next section, reveals that the North Korean defector-activist community serves as a conduit for local opposition, even if it does not directly challenge the regime from within. It is through their work with North Korean defectors that transnational activists have managed to build a convincing case. As Hosaniak discusses in Chapter 6, the decision of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, an important gatekeeper of human rights legitimacy, to take up the claims of the North Korean human rights movement came about as a direct result of the High Commissioner’s meeting with former North Korean political prisoners.

In short, existing theoretical frameworks do help illustrate the trajectory of North Korean human rights advocacy today and the degree to which activists have been effective in both gaining international attention for their issue and promoting change. However, the North Korean case also reveals important theoretical and empirical limitations to our current understanding of how transnational human rights actors secure legitimacy in cases where the rights-

¹⁸ Freedom House, which evaluates the degree of civil and political liberties of each country globally, has placed North Korea in its “worst of the worst” category for 44 consecutive years. In 2017, only Syria scored lower than North Korea. See Shim 2017.

¹⁹ Such studies include Saudi Arabia. See Alhargan 2012; Fleay 2006; Stachursky 2013. Jetschke and Liese provide a more comprehensive list and a discussion of case studies that have adopted the spiral model. See Jetschke and Liese 2013, 28–31.

²⁰ Schwarz 2004, 205. ²¹ Jetschke and Liese 2013, 30.

violating actor is a closed, totalitarian state which has successfully sealed off its domestic population from the rest of the world.

DISCOURSE, NETWORK DYNAMICS, AND DEFECTORS

Three variables are central to the application of our conceptual model of change, and each of these helps shed further light on important elements of the North Korean human rights advocacy network. A deeper understanding of discourse, network dynamics, and defector voices helps elucidate how transnational human rights networks emerge and seek to bring about change in the context of a “hard case” authoritarian state such as North Korea.

Discourse

A central claim of this volume is that activists’ interpretations of their normative commitments – as reflected in their discursive frames – carry consequences for advocacy movements in terms of strategies, agendas, and outcomes. The chapters in this volume, therefore, focus on the discourse of North Korean human rights actors. By discourse, we mean the words, language, statements, and debates which appear in speech or text form from nonstate and state actors. Discursive frames refer to the ideas, principles, and norms that inform discourses.²² This focus enables us to examine the dynamics of the network, including its fragmented nature, at both the domestic and transnational level. It also allows us to better understand the role that defector voices have played in the evolution of the movement.

To casual observers, principled actors within the North Korean human rights advocacy network appear aligned to a common cause: ending human rights abuses in North Korea. While this assumption is true at a basic level, it belies the diversity of activists involved in the movement and fails to take into account the politicized nature of discourse over North Korean human rights. Network activists advocating on behalf of North Korean human rights fall across a broad political spectrum and pursue diverse outcomes ranging from bringing about human rights-compliant behavior in the repressive state to provoking regime change or collapse. By exploring the varieties of discursive frames that activists deploy, as well as the relationship between such discursive frames, transnational mobilization, and human rights advocacy outcomes, the

²² We assume that these are context-specific and, across this volume, vary with respect to domestic or transnational settings. The importance of context has been recognized in work on ideas and discourse and is further explored in Chapter 3. See also Schmidt 2008.

chapters in this volume are able to assess with greater rigor several important issues surrounding North Korean human rights advocacy. These include: network membership and the different coalitions and cleavages that emerge within and between domestic and transnational networks; the ways in which different human rights actors define and interpret their normative commitments, and how this has led to a high degree of contestation within the movement; the range of policy pathways and strategies promoted by diverse actors vying for prominence within the network; and, finally, the variation in state responses to North Korean human rights activism, including that of North Korea, over time and in different national settings.²³

How activists and policy officials talk about North Korean human rights is often embedded in different domestic political contexts. As such, one is able to follow the evolution of North Korean human rights activism and the rise of transnational advocacy networks by tracing different discursive debates concerning human rights across time and geographic space and piecing them together. Through discourse, we uncover how the issue of North Korean human rights has been contested, debated, and politicized by state and nonstate actors alike. For instance, in Chapter 3, Yeo examines how the unfolding of human rights debates in US foreign policy strongly influenced the direction of North Korean human rights activism and the security framing of human rights in the United States. This contrasts with North Korean human rights activism in Japan and the centrality of the abductee issue in that country's discourse, as argued by Arrington in Chapter 4.²⁴ A comparison of North Korean human rights activism and discourse across different national contexts thus highlights the multifaceted nature of human rights advocacy across different polities.

The extent to which we find domestic differences in North Korean human rights discourse leads to additional questions regarding the type of discourse which emerges when activism shifts scale from the domestic to the transnational realm. Do domestic advocacy groups adopt the language of the broader transnational advocacy network, ultimately aligning or transforming existing frames into a global frame by embracing the language of universal rights, accountability, and compliance?²⁵ Or do they manage to insert their own particular domestic agenda into the broader transnational human rights frame, thus influencing the agenda of North Korean human rights at the

²³ On examining how rights movements emerge, contest, and frame their activist claims in multilevel environments, see Ayoub and Chetaille 2017.

²⁴ North Korean agents systematically kidnapped Japanese citizens during the 1970s and 1980s.

²⁵ On the transposition from domestic to global frames, see Tarrow 2005, 63. See also Benford and Snow 2000; Della Porta 2007; Rothman and Oliver 2002; Yeo 2009.

global level? Perhaps human rights actors simply wear two hats, employing a domestically tailored frame and advocacy strategy in their home country on the one hand, while uniting with global activists, NGOs, and IGOs and adopting their movement frame when targeting North Korea at the UN on the other.²⁶ Such issues are taken up in Chapters 6, 7, and 8, where the contributors explore the transnational dimensions of North Korean human rights activism.

Network Dynamics

Scholarship on transnational movements and agenda-setting has helped bring greater nuance to our understanding of network dynamics.²⁷ While existing models of human rights change do recognize that transnational advocacy networks are inherently conflictual, scholars have long believed that networks provide the communicative environment in which participants can be expected to “mutually transform.”²⁸ Keck and Sikkink, for example, see “frame disputes” among human rights activists as a powerful source of normative change within networks.²⁹ Frame disputes certainly stimulate change within networks in the North Korean human rights case, but they do so often in the absence of any sort of mutual transformation. How, then, are issues defined and agendas, strategies, and policy goals agreed upon? In the case of North Korea, which is characterized by the *absence* of a local civil society with which to consult on key issues around strategy and policy direction, these frame disputes are rendered even more complex. What action will best bring about positive change for the North Korean people, ensuring their dignity and improving their lives? Throughout this volume, network dynamics are closely linked to discursive contestation. There is thus a close relationship between these two variables. But by separating them, we are able to more clearly identify the agential and structural forces at play when it comes to normative contestation.

In the absence of any definitive voices from inside the country answering questions such as these, it is unsurprising that there is a great deal of disagreement between “human rights” and “humanitarianism” advocates as noted by Reidhead in Chapter 2.³⁰ But beyond this, human rights activists find themselves at odds over questions such as what the frame defining their advocacy

²⁶ Tarrow 2005, 42–5.

²⁷ On the role of network dynamics in agenda-setting, see Bob 2005; Hertel 2006; Carpenter 2014.

²⁸ Keck and Sikkink 1999, 100; Keck and Sikkink 1998, 214. ²⁹ Keck and Sikkink 1999, 92.

³⁰ See also Yeo 2014.