

By Tom French

With the recent apparent concessions by the Iranian government over death by stoning in the face of western pressure, this seeming victory for 'soft power', begs the question whether similar policies might work on North Korea (DPRK).

The EU seems to think so, having recently passed a resolution on human rights in North Korea, which included the appointment of a special representative and calls on the DPRK to 'abolish the death penalty and end to the ongoing grave, widespread and systematic human rights violations, public executions and extra-judicial executions'.

Whether the EU's involvement or even 'soft power' itself can influence the North remains highly debateable for two principal reasons, the differences between the DPRK and Iran and the character of the North Korean regime.

Despite some minor unrest due to catastrophic currency reform last year, the DPRK, unlike Iran is not plagued by mass internal dissent and hence sees little need to make concessions to appease its populace. Furthermore, North Korea is geographically distant from the EU, is not directly connected to the Middle Eastern crises on which the EU seems more willing to focus, and despite major economic ties with the Far East, the EU has little direct military or political influence in the region. Finally, the DPRK is already in the position to which Iran seems to aspire in having become nuclear capable. As well as effectively insulating the DPRK from attack and acting as a highly valuable bargaining chip, the internal prestige boost these weapons generate may also bolster the state and lessen the need for further concessions on domestic issues. These issues reduce the effectiveness of the EU's 'soft power' on the North and also simultaneously weaken the commitment and focus of the EU on the DPRK.

The nature of the North Korean regime further undermines the potential effectiveness of any attempts at influencing it through 'soft power'. Foremost amongst these is the clear disregard of the regime of the health, lives and rights of its citizens, as has been recently highlighted in an editorial in the Japan Times and a recent report by Amnesty International.

During the ongoing succession struggle within the DPRK it seems that any iota of concern the leadership may have held over its citizens will have sunk way into the background as more pressing matters take centre stage. Furthermore, within such a totalitarian regime it seems that any concessions made to the outside world and the weakness they would imply would loosen the grip of the leadership over the population by challenging its propaganda which often argues the regime is actively protecting Korean sovereignty in the face of Japanese and American neo-colonial ambitions. This added to the mindset of the fiercely independent and possibly paranoid North Korean leadership make the possibility of any concessions, least on 'internal security' very unlikely.

Thus it seems that despite some good intentions the EU's new initiative on the DPRK is likely to come to naught. The leadership of DPRK has long shown it doesn't care about people and is not yet weak enough to care, or see the value in, making concessions to an actor which has little 'hard power' in the region with which to back up any 'soft power' diplomacy.

The US has tried 'hard power' for years, both through sanctions and other measures to coerce DPRK, only to fail and reinforce the paranoia of the North and it seems that if this has had little success the EU's effort at a softer approach may also meet the same fate.

It also seems likely that some of the other Far East powers involved in the six party talks will be unwilling to allow EU to become more deeply involved, especially over human rights, an issue with which China shares more with the DPRK than the West.

The great irony in this process is that despite all these efforts at influencing the North, if the issue of human rights is left aside, the North, its regional neighbours and the West all currently share the same short-term aims for the peninsula: peace, stability, maintenance of the status-quo and economic development.

About the Author

Tom French is a graduate of Durham University and is currently completing his PhD in Northeast Asian Security from Southampton University.