

Why We Should Care

Joseph DeTrani

Ninety-two countries are involved in conflicts beyond their borders. Over 110 million people are either refugees or internally displaced due to violent conflict, with sixteen countries each hosting more than half a million refugees. More than 30 million people in twenty-two countries are in a severe food crisis and are on the brink of starvation. Half the world lacks access to essential health services, many experiencing medicine shortages. According to the World Health Organization, about 4.5 billion people (half the global population) were not fully covered by essential health care.¹

The world has become more dangerous, with some of the nine nuclear weapons states threatening to use nuclear weapons. Geopolitical blocs have proliferated: AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom and the U.S), the QUOD (Australia, India, Japan and the U.S.), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (China, Russia, Iran, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), and the Global South (134 countries), with China determined to prove that their system of governance is far superior to the liberal democracy in the U.S.

The media effectively covers geopolitical conflicts daily. Whether it's Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the war in Gaza or the internecine conflict in Sudan, the media is on the ground, reporting developments. For that we must be grateful.²

However, the humanitarian crises are less visible to the international community. Most of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) doing this work are mission-driven, nonprofit organizations not known to the public. Their work, however, is critical to the well-being of millions of people. I witnessed this personally, as the U.S. Special Envoy for Six Party Talks with North Korea.³

My background and focus were on the denuclearization of North Korea. I was also the U.S. representative to the Korea Energy Development Organization (KEDO), responsible for the construction in North Korea of two light water reactor nuclear power plants for civilian energy. I was knowledgeable of the famine in North Korea in the 1990s, with about one million reportedly dying of starvation. I was also aware of the political prison camps throughout North Korea and the harsh treatment of the inmates. But my principal job was to get North Korea to agree to denuclearize. Working with China, the chair of the Six Party Talks, and South Korea, Japan and Russia, in September 2005 we got North Korea to agree to complete and verifiable denuclearization, on an action-for-action basis, in return for security

assurances, economic development assistance and a path to normalization of relations between our two countries.⁴

During this time, I was fortunate to have met Dr. Stephen Linton, president of the Eugene Bell Foundation. Mr. Linton knew North and South Korea better than anyone I knew. He was Reverend Billy Graham's interpreter and adviser when Rev. Graham visited North Korea in 1992 and 1994. And in 1995, Mr. Linton established the Eugene Bell Foundation, initially providing food aid to North Korea. Eventually, this developed into providing multidrug-resistant tuberculosis treatment across North Korea, where 440 of every 100,000 people are afflicted with this disease. By 2008, Mr. Linton told me his Foundation treated about 250,000 patients who go through 18 months of therapy.⁵

It was this exposure to Mr. Linton that encouraged me to also focus on some of the humanitarian issues affecting the lives of the 26 million people in North Korea: food scarcity, shortage of medicines and a backward health care system. It was clear that NGOs like the Eugene Bell Foundation needed access to North Korea and the people who are hurting. This continues to be a challenge, given the sanctions imposed on North Korea for their repeated violation of Security Council resolutions penalizing them for their missile launches and nuclear tests.

Thus, as a negotiator I became fully aware of the need to assist North Korea in coping with food scarcity and the lack of medicines in a health care system requiring lots of attention. Normalizing relations with the U.S., and eventually reunifying with South Korea and establishing relations with Japan, was the goal to resolving some of these humanitarian issues. We were almost there in 2005, with the Joint Statement of the Six Party Talks, but more work must be done.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the focus my negotiating team and I devoted to the political prison camps in North Korea. In negotiations with North Korea, we made it clear that we would eventually normalize relations with North Korea when, in addition to denuclearization, progress was made with these political prison camps. We asked for access to these camps and requested that North Korea start to close these camps.⁶

As a member of the National Committee on North Korea (NCNK), I am fortunate to meet and collaborate with several NGOs whose sole mission is to provide humanitarian assistance to North Korea. Recent developments with North Korea have been difficult, but these NGOs are determined to contribute to the well-being of the 26 million people in North Korea.⁷

My experience has been with North Korea. But there are an ever-increasing number of countries in need of humanitarian assistance. The brave NGOs in Gaza and the Eugene Bell

Foundation in North Korea are models of the important and unique role of NGOs—and other organizations and advocates—that provide humanitarian assistance to so many countries in need.

Leadership

So much depends on the leadership of people who contribute to ensuring that humanitarian needs of the people are addressed, but also those leaders who work toward preventing conflict and war while nurturing dialogue and cooperation. Leaders can be heads of state or anyone in a position to effect change for the common good. Indeed, in democracies, voting for representatives who advocate for peace and stability is a basic right—and responsibility—of the people. And the representatives elected should make decisions to pursue peace and enhance the well-being of the people.

Leadership makes a difference. Indeed, enlightened leadership can bring peace and cooperation to a world that currently is in disarray.

I highlight the leadership and vision of three world leaders who worked to bring peace and cooperation—for their own people and to people in the global community: former U.S. President Richard Milhous Nixon, former People's Republic of China Chairman Deng Xiaoping, and former U.S. President Bill Clinton.

Richard Milhous Nixon

The U.S. and China were enemies when Nixon was elected president on November 5, 1968. The Korean War (1950-53) resulted in over 37,000 American troops killed and over 92,000 wounded, with China having over 110,000 Chinese troops killed and over 380,000 wounded.⁸ Tension between the U.S. and China (People's Republic of China) persisted through the 1960s. During this tense period, U.S. and Chinese representatives were meeting in Warsaw to ease tensions and improve relations. In February 1970, after 139 meetings in Warsaw between ambassadors from the US. and China, Nixon became impatient with the lack of any progress in these talks.⁹

A classified U.S. document said China thought conflict with the U.S, a capitalist imperialist country, was unavoidable and war was probable.¹⁰ In 1965, McGeorge Bundy, President Johnson's national security adviser, said China was a problem for all peaceful people. But it was Nixon in his inaugural address on January 20, 1969, who said: "Let all nations know that during this administration our lines of communications will be open. We seek an open world... a world in which no people, great or small, will live in angry isolation."¹¹

And on February 21, 1972, Nixon traveled to China. He was a conservative and an avid anti-communist who had the vision and courage to make this breakthrough and reach out to China, a communist country that viewed the U.S. as the enemy. In his first meeting with China's Chairman Mao Zedong, in Mao's packed-with-books study, Nixon asked Mao: "Why did the Soviet Union have more troops (forces) on the border facing you (China) rather than on the border facing Western Europe?" He then asked Mao, "Which was the greater danger: American aggression or Soviet aggression?" Mao said a state of war did not exist between our countries (China and the U.S.).¹²

During Nixon's visit, the Shanghai Communique was signed, which stated in part: "The U.S. acknowledged all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China."¹³ To this day, the Shanghai Communique is cited as the authoritative document that led to the normalization of relations between the U.S. and China. Indeed, Nixon's objective was to normalize relations with China during his second term. However, on August 9, 1974, President Richard Milhous Nixon resigned from the presidency due to the Watergate scandal.¹⁴ On January 1, 1979, the U.S. and China normalized relations, moving the U.S. Embassy from Taipei to Beijing.¹⁵

Nixon's visit to China was the beginning of a strategic partnership between the U.S. and China that eventually contributed to the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was a Chinese leader who seized on the normalization of relations between the U.S. and China to make China the global power that it is today. That man was Deng Xiaoping.

Deng Xiaoping

When Mao died in 1976, he was briefly replaced by Hua Guofeng. But in December 1978, Deng Xiaoping took over as China's supreme leader, the Chairman of China's Communist Party and President of the People's Republic China. Deng previously was purged twice, by Mao and by the radical Gang of Four, headed by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing. But Deng returned to power given the support he had from Party leaders who viewed Deng as a patriot and visionary, capable of making China great again.

Deng's vision of market-oriented reforms and opening to the outside world for investment, technology, and trade met with opposition from some in leadership positions, but Deng persisted, knowing China needed an infusion of foreign technology. He visited the U.S. in 1979 and in meetings with President Jimmy Carter made it clear that China was looking to the U.S. for help with its economic modernization. Returning from the U.S., Deng moved quickly on decollectivization of agriculture, land reform, establishing free markets well-received by the public, and with his decision to encourage foreign investment in China. Indeed, Deng encouraged Chinese students to study in the U.S., noting that even if only 10% return, China would benefit. To this day, there are over 300,000 Chinese students studying in the U.S.¹⁶

Deng also implemented an ambitious political reform program that called for collective leadership and term limits, with a strong Communist Party in the lead. Deng often referred to the four little dragons—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan—as economic models for a poor China.

With Deng's encouragement, in 1979 American Motors entered discussion with China to build jeeps in China, with the Jeep Cherokee XJ coming off the production line in 1985. Today, there are hundreds of U.S. companies doing business in China.

From a poor and struggling country in 1978, China developed into the world's second largest economy with a GDP in 2023 of \$17.8 trillion USD.

Geopolitically, Deng ensured that China worked closely with the U.S. on national security issues. This was a time when the Soviet Union was marching to the tune of the Brezhnev Doctrine: Soviet interference in Vietnam, Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Yemen, Libya, Czechoslovakia, Nicaragua, Grenada and in 1979, Afghanistan. It was Deng who decided to have China cooperate with the U.S. to defeat the Soviet Union in an Afghanistan that Moscow invaded. China, working with the U.S. and Pakistan, ensured that weapons reached the Mujahideen and in November 1986, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev made the decision to withdraw all Soviet combat troops from Afghanistan by the end of 1988. Gorbachev said Afghanistan had become a bleeding wound.

China's collaboration with the U.S. on its economic modernization program, and with the U.S. and Pakistan to defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, are just some of the legacies of Deng Xiaoping, a great leader who died on February 19, 1997.

Bill Clinton

In 1993 North Korea had refused to permit International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitors to visit a suspect area at their Yongbyon nuclear reactor facility. North Korea threatened to leave the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and threatened to make South Korea's capital, Seoul, a "sea of flames." There was much senior-level discussion in Washington at that time to bomb North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear reactor.¹⁷

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter informed the Clinton White House that he was prepared to visit Pyongyang and meet with their leader, Kim Il Sung, as a private citizen interested in peace on the Korean Peninsula. There was much bureaucratic opposition to permitting Carter to travel to Pyongyang for meetings with Kim Il Sung. Despite this opposition, Clinton

approved Carter's trip to North Korea, as a private citizen, representing the Carter Foundation and not the U.S. government.

On June 15, 1994, Carter, with his wife, Rosslyn, crossed the DMZ and after a ride into Pyongyang, and a banquet hosted by North Korea's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Carter did meet with Kim for an amicable discussion. This and further discussions led to the establishment of the Geneva Talks, with the U.S. and North Korea finally agreeing that North Korea would not reprocess their spent fuel rods from the facility at Yongbyon and cease with the construction of two large nuclear reactors under construction, in return for light water proliferation-resistant reactors the U.S. would provide. And while the two light water reactors were being built, at Kumho, North Korea, the U.S. would provide North Korea with heavy fuel oil for their energy needs. The U.S. then reached out to South Korea, Japan, and the European Union to help finance this project and established the Korea Energy Development Organization.

Clinton navigated the U.S. through this process, despite the Republican Party taking control of the Congress in 1994 and restricting payments for the two light water reactors, thus the establishment of KEDO, with allied participation...

The period from 1994 to 2000 was eventful. Kim died in 1994, after his meetings with Carter, and was replaced by his son, Kim Jong Il. At that time, mainly due to flooding caused by excessive rain, North Korea's agricultural production reached a new low, resulting in food scarcity and a reported significant number of North Koreans dying of starvation. The U.S., working with the United Nations World Food Organization, provided significant amounts of food aid, but this was not enough for a population of 25 million.

Despite the economic distress caused by food scarcity, the period of 1994-2000 was a period of hope, with the U.S. and partners building light water reactors and North Korea permitting IAEA monitors to have access they needed at Yongbyon to certify North Korea was in compliance with nuclear safeguard agreements.¹⁸

Primarily at the United Nations and through Beijing, the U.S. was in communications with North Korea. In fact, the dialogue was upbeat, with the U.S. inviting North Korea's second most powerful official, Vice Marshall Jo Myong-rok, to visit the U.S. and meet with President Clinton. The historic October 2000 meeting with Clinton at the White House went extremely well, with both talking about peace on the Korean Peninsula and normalization of relations. During Jo's visit, he invited Clinton to visit North Korea and meet with Chairman Kim Jong Un. Indeed, Clinton contemplated taking this trip but with the upcoming presidential election Clinton announced on December 28 that he would not travel to North Korea before the end of his term.

One week after Vice Marshall Jo Myong Rok concluded his unprecedented visit to Washington and meeting with Clinton, Secretary of State Madeline Albright traveled to Pyongyang as the highest-level U.S. official ever to visit North Korea. Her visit was explained as an effort to discuss and resolve nuclear and missile issues and discuss the possibility of a future visit by President Bill Clinton.¹⁹

Her meetings with Chairman Kim Jong Il went well, with Kim noting that Albright's visit was the first secretary of state to visit North Korea. Kim said: "This is a new one from a historical point of view ... I am really happy."

Returning to Washington, Albright briefed the Congress and the Cabinet on her visit and the positive discussions she had with Kim. As previously mentioned, Clinton was preoccupied with the upcoming presidential elections and did not travel to North Korea, despite his interest in such a visit.

The George W. Bush Administration took over in January 2001, and in 2003, with the help of China, established the Six Party Talks, hosted by China, with South Korea, Japan, and the Soviet Union joining the U.S. in this multilateral effort to resolve the nuclear issue with North Korea.

During the Obama Administration, Clinton did eventually travel to North Korea, this time as a private citizen. In August 2009, Clinton visited North Korea on a humanitarian mission to receive the return of Euna Lee and Laura Ling, two American journalists who were captured by North Korea for reportedly illegally entering North Korea. During Clinton's visit he did meet with Chairman Kim and exchanged pleasantries. He did not, however, discuss bilateral relations and ongoing negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea. In fact, Clinton was told not to discuss these issues and just focus on receiving and returning with the two U.S. journalists. Clinton's mission was successful, although some said it was also a missed opportunity to discuss bilateral relations, given Clinton's intimacy with issues related to North Korea, starting with the Agreed Framework in 1994, and the high-level visit of Vice Marshall Jo to Washington and Secretary Albright to North Korea.

More on Leadership

Especially now, with the proliferation of wars and conflicts and the dire economic situation in so many countries, with food scarcity and poor health care institutions, enlightened leadership is necessary: leadership to prevent wars and conflicts, and to provide aid from wealthy countries to those economically struggling countries.

NGOs and other human rights organizations make a difference. We saw it in Gaza. I continue to see it in North Korea. A global campaign is necessary to address the myriads of food scarcity and health care issues challenging so many countries. Indeed, the United Nations and affiliated organizations, like the World Food Program, are doing some of this, but more must be done.

And that's where leadership kicks in, leadership at all levels, to prevent wars and conflicts and to work for the common good. I cited two world leaders—Richard Milhous Nixon and Deng Xiaoping—who made an immense difference in preventing conflict and bringing peace to the people of China and the U.S. They also brought economic well-being to the people of China. That's what global leaders can do. And that's why each person in our global community must, when possible, demand that their leaders do more to bring peace and stability to the world we live in. It's a fragile world and we must do more to ensure that our children and their children have a world where peace prevails and those in need are cared for.

A final word on what Richard Milhous Nixon and Deng Xiaoping might say were they to assess U.S.-China relations today. And what about North Korea, with thirty years of negotiations and the history of NGOs addressing the humanitarian needs of the people?

China

Richard Milhous Nixon would say he was correct in reaching out to China and eventually normalizing relations. He would, however, be disappointed that the bilateral relationship had deteriorated to the point of some in the U.S.—and China—predicting conflict and war, whether over Taiwan or in the South China Sea. Nixon would ask why diplomacy wasn't able to manage some of these bilateral irritants. He would be critical of those leaders in the U.S. who didn't do more to prevent China from becoming an adversary, given that it was the U.S. that China looked to for economic development assistance. And indeed, it was China that the U.S. relied on to defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Nixon would wonder how China, a country originally concerned about Soviet aggression, would now become an ally of the Soviet Union. Indeed, it was this concern about Soviet intentions that contributed to Mao Zedong's openness to a Nixon visit in 1972, and memorializing the Shanghai Communique. In little over fifty years, U.S. relations with China have deteriorated to a low never anticipated when Nixon reached out to China. So, Nixon would ask what our leaders are doing to reverse this negative trend, to ensure that there is no war with China? He would ask why it's not acceptable in the U.S. to use the term "peaceful coexistence" when referring to China?

Deng Xiaoping would be equally distressed with China's relationship with the Russian Federation and confused with China's apparent acceptance of Russia as an ally. Deng remembered the Soviet Union (now the Russian Federation) as a threat to China's national security, which was why Deng personally agreed to work with the U.S. to defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Deng would be pleased with China's economic modernization and the achievement of the world's second-largest GDP. But Deng would acknowledge that it was because China worked closely with the U.S. on its economic development plan. Indeed, it was the U.S. who provided China with most-favored-nation status in the late 1990s and got China into the World Trade Organization in 2001.

Deng would be disappointed with President Xi Jinping's decision to embrace Putin and provide dual-use materials for their war in Ukraine, a sovereign country invaded by a bigger neighbor. He would also be disappointed with Xi's decision to seek a third term as Chairman of the Party and President of the country, when Deng espoused a two-term Chairmanship, with collective leadership.

But most disappointing to Deng would be the deterioration in relations with the U.S. and the possibility of conflict in the Taiwan Strait of the South China Sea.

North Korea

The Clinton Administration worked hard to improve relations with North Korea. Approving the visit of former President Carter to North Korea at such a tense time was a stroke of brilliant diplomacy. Carter traveled as a private citizen and had meaningful talks with Chairman Kim Il Sung. This led to the Geneva talks and the Agreed Framework that halted all activities at their Yongbyon nuclear reactor, while halting construction at two larger reactors for nuclear weapons. Providing humanitarian food aid and the invitation of Vice Marshall Jo to meet with Clinton and Albright's visit to meet with Chairman Kim were moves in the right direction. Unfortunately, Clinton didn't visit North Korea as planned but in 2009 did visit as a private citizen to return with two imprisoned U.S. journalists.

It's likely Clinton regrets recent developments with North Korea. Indeed, North Korea's nuclear and missile programs must concern him, as well as North Korea's recent allied relationship with the Russian Federation. We were so close in the late 1990s, but it unfortunately escaped us.

For those NGOs that worked for decades in North Korea, like the Eugene Bell Foundation, and those diplomats who spent hundreds of hours negotiating with North Korea, the current

bilateral relationship with North Korea and its leader, Kim Jong Un, is both sad and tragic. How could a North Korea that sought a normal relationship with the U.S. for over three decades, now be aligned with the Russian Federation? Why is North Korea providing artillery shells, drones and over 10,000 Special Forces troops to Russia for its war of aggression in Ukraine?

Given the mounting number of sanctions imposed on North Korea, and policy decisions on who can visit North Korea, how can the 26 million people in North Korea receive the humanitarian assistance needed? How can the people in North Korea be assured that they will have access to the multidrug-resistant tuberculosis treatment?

How can there be peaceful reunification with South Korea when North Korea memorialized in its constitution that South Korea and the U.S. are their principal enemies, while eschewing any form of reunification with South Korea?

A nuclear North Korea, now aligned with the Russian Federation, is a threat to South Korea and the region. And indeed, with the successful launch of the Hwasong-19, an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile capable of targeting the whole of the U.S., North Korea is becoming an existential threat to the U.S. Relations with North Korea have deteriorated to its lowest level since the Korean War. How did this happen? Could the leadership in the U.S. and South Korea have done more to prevent these negative developments? Our job will be to convince our leaders to work even harder on all issues related to North Korea. Resuming negotiations with North Korea should be our goal, with an eventual peace treaty that will bring peace to the Korean Peninsula.

Notes

1. Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, Universite De Geneve, available at <https://www.unige.ch>.
2. Crisis Group, "Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2024," January 1, 2024, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2024>.
3. Council on Foreign Relations, "The Six Party Talks on North Korea's Nuclear Program," September 30, 2013, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/six-party-talks-north-koreas-nuclear-program>.
4. U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks," September 19, 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/53490.htm>.
5. The Korea Herald, "Linton family has century-old history of service to Korea," November 30, 2012, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10378235>.
6. Amnesty International, "North Korea: Political Prison Camps," May 3, 2011, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/asa240012011en.pdf>.
7. National Committee on North Korea, November 19, 2023, <http://www.ncnk.org>.
8. National Army Museum, <https://www.nam.ac.uk>.
9. Henry Kissinger, *On China* (Penguin Press, 2011), Chapter 8.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Kissinger, *On China*, page 262.
14. National Archives, <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/>.
15. Brookings, "Thirty Years Later: Normalization of U.S.-China Relations," <https://www.brookings.edu/events/thirty-years-later-normalization-of-u-s-china-relations/>.
16. China Daily, "Chinese Students Very Much Welcome": U.S. official, <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/upload/main/pdf/2024/11/20/91287071a99712204b21c09fc75df523.pdf>.
17. Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Poneman, and Robert L. Gallucci, *The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), pp. 9-201.
18. Ibid.

19. Arms Control Association, "Clinton Decides Not to Visit North Korea,"
<https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2001-01/news-briefs/clinton-decides-not-visit-north-korea>.