Is it time for the U.S. to ban tourism to N. Korea?

U.S. hesitates to obstruct visits, even to nations with adversarial relations, in recent decades

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Sharing a Bible, declaring asylum, launching a subterranean campaign whose name alludes to a Biblical conquest tale: all ill-advised moves by Americans in North Korea that have given the State Department more work to do.

So why does the U.S. government put up with it? Why not simply stop Americans, except those with special permission, from entering North Korea at all?

A panel of American experts said that, difficult as such incidents may make life for diplomats, an actual ban on travel is unlikely, because it would be contrary to American values.

While there is some precedent for the move – the U.S. did ban travel to Cuba for decades, only partially lifting the ban in the last year – the U.S. has trended toward greater travel allowances since the 1970s. The most the American government has done in response to these abductions – and other provocations by the North – is “strongly advise” against travel there.

And regardless of the stances these U.S.-based experts take on other North Korea-related issues, they did not call for stronger measures against travel there.

In part 20 of a new NK News expert interview series, American experts who talked to NK News
Q20) Why hasn’t the U.S. state department completely banned U.S. citizens from traveling to North Korea given the repeat arrests and use of U.S. citizens as bargaining chips? Do you think tourism should be banned?
In general, the United States has moved away from outright travel restrictions as a way of punishing adversaries, leaving it to private citizens to make their own choices.

I see no reason to ban tourists from going to North Korea; the travel advisories are clear. But I do think that the State Department should underline that if detained, there may be little that American authorities can do to immediately secure citizens’ release.

Among the recent dozen or so detainees, virtually all took risks – wittingly or unwittingly – that led to their detention; I sympathize with the pain they have caused their families, but most seem to have brought their troubles on themselves. Perhaps the most egregious in this regard were Laura Ling and Euna Lee.

Every time an adventurous U.S. journalist, naïve tourist, or well-meaning missionary is arrested, the question arises whether Washington should formally ban private travel to North Korea. The issue assumes greater resonance when Pyongyang demands a high-level envoy, payment, or alteration in U.S. policy.

Despite North Korea’s claim of religious freedom, a right supposedly guaranteed by its constitution, foreigners have been arrested for even the slightest appearance of religious proselytizing, which is considered a grave threat to the regime. Each of the Americans were detained for behaving in ways that would have been protected by other nations’ basic rules of freedom of expression and religion.
North Korea’s treatment of foreigners underscores how repressive and resistant to reform its regime is.

The United States does not ban Americans from visiting North Korea, but the State Department has issued travel advisories “strongly recommend[ing] against all travel by U.S. citizens,” warning that “U.S. citizen tourists have been subject to arbitrary arrest and long-term detention.” U.S. officials have commented that banning U.S. citizen tourism to North Korea might go against citizens’ rights of freedom to travel.

While the United States should engage in energetic diplomatic efforts through normal channels whenever an American citizen is arrested, it should not send a special envoy nor acquiesce to North Korean demands for policy changes. Washington should instead highlight North Korean human rights abuses against its citizens as well as foreigners, including at the upcoming U.N. General Assembly meeting.

Advocates of engagement with North Korea assert that increased social interaction (such as tourism, student exchanges, and sports and cultural events) will enhance mutual understanding, reduce mutual distrust, and lead to diplomatic breakthroughs. Instead, North Korea’s treatment of foreigners underscores how repressive and resistant to reform its regime is. Nor has such unofficial engagement brought about political or economic reform, nor moderated the regime’s threatening foreign policy stance.

The immediate answer to your question is that the State Department by itself cannot ban travel to the DPRK, even if it were so inclined. This is a legal matter which has to do with somewhat arcane U.S. laws passed by Congress, and this would require an amendment to certain existing laws which were used for one time banning travel to Cuba.

As to the overarching question about the merits of travel to DPRK, I myself – perhaps to the surprise of some – am not in favor of making American travel to North Korea illegal.

It seems to me that there is some virtue in communications between adversarial societies, if only to reduce the scope of misunderstandings since the big differences are already so obvious. That’s not to say that the State Department might not want to issue very strict advisories against hapless Americans who might turn out to be live bait for future DPRK-U.S. negotiations. Caveat emptor is very much I think apropos in any considerations of travel to North Korea these days. The rules seem to have changed a little bit.

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Especially since President Jimmy Carter removed most restrictions on American citizens’ right to travel overseas in 1977, the U.S. government has been loath to limit Americans’ right to travel abroad.

In 1978, Congress even revised the passport law to make it impossible for the president to limit citizens’ foreign travel except in cases of hostilities or imminent danger to public health.

As a result of repeated North Korean incarcerations of American citizens for acts that in other countries would not be crimes at all or would result only in expulsion, the Obama administration has gone further than any American administration since the end of the Cold War in “strongly” recommending against “all travel” to North Korea. Given American values, I believe this is the appropriate policy.

At the individual level, there are certainly some risks to traveling to North Korea as a U.S. citizen, and the State Department has explained the potential dangers in its travel advisory.

In the past, North Korea has indeed detained U.S. citizens who arrived with tour groups or for illegally entering the country; last year’s release of three prisoners – including Kenneth Bae, who had been imprisoned for two years, the longest ever for a U.S. citizen – is the most recent example.

*Main picture: NK News*