The ties between South and North Koreas are becoming closer and there are fewer tensions in the relationship between DPRK and the USA. That often makes us forget that, though it was rather the Democrats’ strategy to pick on North Korea for violating human rights, the pressure on Pyongyang for this reason has merely become less blatant.

For example, on 23 October 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in DPRK, Tomás Ojea Quintana, announced that over the past year many changes had taken place on the Korean Peninsula, but the situation with human rights in DPRK remained the same. He referred to testimonies, made by defectors from North Korea, when he said that ordinary North Korean inhabitants were starving and had no access to medical services due to lack of money. During his speech he even showed a pad lock, which had been given to him as a gift by a teenage defector from North Korea, and said that specifically the United Nations had the key to improving the human right situation in DPRK.

On 15 November, the UN General Assembly Third Committee on human rights, humanitarian affairs and social matters unanimously (without a vote) approved yet another resolution, put forward by Japan and the European Union, condemning DPRK for violating human rights. The UN has been adopting such resolutions since 2005, and the latest resolution happens to be the 14th one. And just as the resolutions approved earlier, it condemns DPRK for constant, systematic, widespread and grave violations of human rights in the north of the Korean Peninsula. It demands, among other things, that all labor camps be immediately closed, all prisoners freed, and all parties, responsible for violating human rights, be held responsible. The authors of the document urge for the situation in DPRK to be resolved in the International Criminal Court; for the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to be brought to
justice, and for concrete measures to be taken on this issue, with due consideration to be given to the conclusions reached by the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) to investigate violations of human rights in DPRK (as it turns out the notorious 2014 report was, for the most part, based on false testimonies).

In reality, no serious changes were made to the document, which, according to South Korean media sources, lends evidence to the idea that no progress has been made to resolve human rights issues in North Korea, and does not illustrate the fact that such resolutions are produced regardless of the reality on the ground in North Korea. Still, the UN Committee on humanitarian affairs “has welcomed” Pyongyang’s attempts to normalize diplomatic relations with the international community and to abide by the inter-Korean agreements on families split up by the conflict.

In response, North Korea's Ambassador to the United Nations, Kim Song, stated that discussions about human rights violations in DPRK were out of the question, and that the international community was meddling in internal affairs of a sovereign nation. China, Russia, Syria, Myanmar and other countries also did not support the resolution, but they did not demand for its approval to be put to a vote. They did not do so because the international community cannot demand that Pyongyang abide by its conditions, and the pressure applied by the resolution on North Korea is not great enough to start a confrontation over it. DPRK media outlets also called the resolution a thinly veiled campaign to tarnish North Korea’s reputation, and stated that the step taken by the UN was aimed at halting the current trend towards better dialogue and peace.

In November 2018, Moon Jong In, a special advisor to the South Korean President on issues connected with diplomacy and unification, advised the DPRK leader to start focusing on human rights issues, and to better still close labor camps. In his opinion, any rhetoric voiced by Kim Jong-un on human rights issues can substantially help Pyongyang gain more trust from the international community. Quoting the statement made by Moon Jong In, Amnesty International estimated (it would be interesting to know how) that there are more than 130,000 political prisoners in North Korea. And on 31 October 2018, experts from the international organization Human Rights Watch published an 86-page report, entitled “You Cry at Night but Don’t Know Why: Sexual Violence against Women in North Korea”, which stated that North Korean officials used the lawless rape of women as a mechanism of repression. We will dedicate a separate article to the analysis of this report, as it is a good example of how broad interpretations of the meaning of the word “rape”, and inaccurate information selection help transform DPRK into an analogue of those African nations where mass rape is actually part of repression means, used by authorities.

On 26 November, the main DPRK newspaper commented on the Human Rights Watch report and the repeated allusions to this issue, by noting that the USA had been using these mind games in order to gain concessions from DPRK in negotiations and to destabilize the North Korean regime. The paper also reported that, currently in the US, it is being asserted that the stumbling block in the relationship between the USA and DPRK is the nuclear issue. But once this issue is resolved to the benefit of Washington, the US will use the human rights violation issue or another reason to apply pressure on DPRK to change its regime.

On 27 November, the international news agency France-Presse announced that Washington approached the UN Security Council with a request to hold a meeting on the human rights issues in North Korea on 10 December. Such meetings have taken place since 2014, and despite objections from Beijing, the request has already received support from 9 nation-participants, which is essential for its approval.

DPRK's Ambassador to the United Nations once again expressed regret at the fact that the UN Security Council followed orders from Washington blindly, and highlighted that the decision would not have a favorable effect on the outcomes of diplomatic negotiations between the international community and Pyongyang.

Along with international sanctions, imposed in response to the violations, unilateral ones are also being used. Hence, on 29 November, in order to reinforce the fight against human trafficking, Donald Trump signed an executive order to ban provision of non-humanitarian and non-trade financial assistance to a number of countries in year 2019. Eighteen countries were placed in this banned list, which includes DPRK, China, Iran, South Sudan, Eritrea, Venezuela and even the Russian Federation. They were included, because their local authorities failed to make enough effort to combat human trafficking, and these restrictions will remain in place until the nations take decisive action. Trump appealed to the International Monetary Fund and development banks to not offer credit lines to the previously mentioned nations.

Every year, the USA publishes a report on human trafficking, and every time DPRK, for 16 years in a row now, is listed as a nation which actively engages in human trafficking. Since 2003, the country has received the lowest rating, which means that it is actively involved in human trafficking within its borders, and that local authorities take no measures to resolve this issue. In the case of DPRK, “slave trade” usually refers to the fate of North Korean
defectors to China, who end up in inhumane conditions on account of the efforts made by the so-called “brokers” that are often protected by South Korean NGOs.

As the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in DPRK, Tomás Ojea Quintana, stated, the United Nations would embrace closer ties between the two Koreas, but human rights violations were impossible to ignore. The author urges the readers to remember this statement and also recall it when answering the question “Will DPRK be left alone after it (let us say this is possible) fulfills the denuclearization requirements?” After all, in one possible scenario any mistake on North Korea’s part is presented as deplorable, but in another, as an unfortunate incident, which is easily forgotten. It is probably not worth explaining what the reaction of the international community would have been if the diplomatic mission where a dissident was dismembered had been a North Korean and not a Saudi one.

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