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# Why I Went to North Korea

Nicholas Kristof OCT. 14, 2017

Since my five-day visit to North Korea recently, I've encountered pushback from critics who ask, "Why go?"

First, they argue: *You needlessly put yourself at risk and give Kim Jong-un a bargaining chip if he grabs you. The U.S. government shouldn't have to worry about bone-headed journalists in enemy territory.*

Second, they say: *By going to North Korea, you simply become a mouthpiece for a country that you admit is the most totalitarian country in the history of the world. It's a Potemkin country, and you become a "useful idiot" transmitting propaganda.*

Frankly, these are legitimate arguments. So let's seize the moment for an honest discussion — and, in the process, let me offer a behind-the-scenes glimpse of reporting there.

Getting a visa to North Korea is always tough, and my latest attempt involved long and delicate negotiations with North Korean diplomats — and with my wife. (That's not a complaint: If she were eager for me to go to North Korea, I'd be worried.)

Four of us from The Times obtained visas (stay tuned for a video we're making from the trip), and then quickly received U.S. State Department approval, along with special U.S. passports valid for travel to North Korea.

The only way into North Korea is on daily flights from Beijing on creaky Russian planes. The in-flight entertainment is a video of a North Korean military orchestra playing classical music, interspersed with scenes of missiles being launched.

From the moment we arrived, we were escorted by two Foreign Ministry handlers, and we were housed at a guarded Foreign Ministry compound.

Our hosts were always courteous, but there was a whiff of menace that didn't exist on my previous trips to North Korea, not least because three Americans are currently being detained there. And just in August, North Korea sentenced two South Korean journalists and their publishers to death in absentia for their writing.

It was also troubling that we were given strong hints that the Foreign Ministry was isolating us and escorting us as protection from military and security agencies, which weren't on board with our presence.

North Korea is the most rigidly controlled country in the world, with no open dissent, no religion and no civil society, and there is zero chance that anyone will express dissatisfaction with the government.

Still, the conversations were illuminating. Ordinary North Koreans were unfamiliar with the name of Otto Warmbier, the American student who died days after being returned to the United States in a vegetative state after his detention in Pyongyang for stealing a poster. But they knew all about President Trump's threats to destroy their country. That's because the government wants them to know about Trump's threats, because they bolster Kim's nationalist narrative that he protects Korea from imperialist American aggressors.

Being on the ground in a country lets you see things and absorb their power: the speaker on the walls of homes to feed propaganda; the pins that every adult wears with portraits of members of the Kim family; the daily power outages, but also signs that the economy is growing despite international sanctions; the Confucian emphasis

on dignity that makes officials particularly resent Trump's personal attacks on Kim; the hardening of attitudes since my last visit, in 2005; and the bizarre confidence that North Korea can not only survive a nuclear war with the U.S. but also emerge as victor.

At one factory, we came upon workers doing their "political study." North Koreans explained that they have political study for two hours a day, plus most of the day on Saturday, so I asked what they focused on these days. "We must fight against the Americans!" one woman answered earnestly. And then the North Koreans in the room dissolved into laughter, perhaps because of the oddness of saying this to Americans.

A visit humanizes North Koreans, who outside the country sometimes come across as robots. In person, you are reminded that they laugh, flirt, worry, love and yearn to impress.

A military officer greeted me with a bone-crushing handshake, and I asked if that was meant to intimidate and convey to the Yankee imperialists that North Koreans are muscular supermen. He laughed in embarrassment, and when we ended the interview, he was much gentler.

I left North Korea fearing that we are far too complacent about the risk of a cataclysmic war that could kill millions. And that's why reporting from within North Korea is crucial: There simply is no substitute for being in a place. It's a lesson we should have learned from the run-up to the Iraq war, when the reporting was too often from the Washington echo chamber rather than the field. When the stakes are millions of lives and official communications channels are nonexistent, then journalism can sometimes serve as a bridge — and as a warning.

Yes, we must carefully weigh the risks — physical risks and the danger of being used by propagandists — and work to mitigate them.

But I have a sinking feeling in my gut, just as I had on the eve of the Iraq war, that our president may be careening blindly toward war. In that case, the job of journalists is to go out and report, however imperfectly, and try to ring alarm bells in the night.

*I invite you to sign up for my free, twice-weekly email newsletter. Please also join me on Facebook and Google+, watch my YouTube videos and follow me on Twitter (@NickKristof).*

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