

# Issue Brief

Vol.138, No.13, 2025

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The UN's High-Level Response to North Korean  
Human Rights: Strategic and Diplomatic  
Implications

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## Abstract

The High-Level Plenary Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly held on May 20, 2025, constitutes a watershed moment that elevated the North Korean human rights issue to a top-tier agenda item within the UN system and redefined it as a matter of strategic concern within the broader international security architecture. Notably, the second Trump administration demonstrated both strategic continuity and policy coherence by taking the lead in orchestrating the participation of North Korean defectors and in formulating a structured framework that interlinks security and human rights. During the meeting, the United States reiterated its integrated approach by underscoring the structural mechanisms through which human rights abuses—such as forced labor, cybercrime, and militarized supply chains—directly sustain North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs. The event also served to operationalize a multilateral diplomatic model for advancing the North Korean human rights agenda, combining formal proceedings with confidential, stakeholder-driven consultations anchored in civil society cooperation. In contrast, North Korea and the so-called “Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations” invoked the principles of sovereignty and non-interference to caution against what they framed as the politicization of human rights. However, their assertions revealed significant limitations in both normative legitimacy and long-term viability within the context of international norm-building. In response to these evolving dynamics, the Republic of Korea must clearly articulate North Korean human rights as a matter of universal values and formulate an integrated strategy that coherently combines security-human rights diplomacy, civil society-based platforms, and the refinement of information systems in preparation for eventual unification.

### Keywords

North Korean human rights, UN General Assembly High-Level Meeting, human rights–security nexus, Group of Friends in Defense of the UN Charter

# The UN's High-Level Response to North Korean Human Rights: Strategic and Diplomatic Implications

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On May 20, 2025 (local time), a High-Level Plenary Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly was convened in New York to address the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The meeting was held pursuant to Resolution 79/181, which had been unanimously adopted during the 79th session of the General Assembly in December of the previous year. Article 28 of the resolution explicitly stipulates that the President of the General Assembly shall convene a high-level plenary meeting to discuss the DPRK human rights situation, including testimonies from civil society actors and subject-matter experts. This meeting was thus organized as a formal follow-up measure to the resolution and carries historical significance as the first instance in which the North Korean human rights issue was addressed at a high-level forum under the auspices of the UN General Assembly.

## **U.S. Policy Consistency on North Korean Human Rights Amid International Coordination**

The recent high-level meeting served as a clear demonstration of the United States' sustained strategic commitment to the North Korean human rights issue, thereby partially alleviating concerns within segments of the international community regarding a potential downgrading of the U.S. role. Such concerns had

emerged in response to a series of developments, including the suspension of funding allocations by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED); Executive Order 14238, issued on March 14, 2025, which resulted in the cessation of U.S. broadcasting services targeting North Korea; and the structural reorganization of the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) on April 22, which in turn delayed the selection process for projects supporting DPRK human rights initiatives.

In addition to these apparent shifts in policy posture concerning North Korean human rights, the U.S. administration also signaled its intent to recalibrate its financial contributions to the United Nations. The United States currently provides 22 percent of the UN's regular budget and 26 percent of its peacekeeping operations (PKO) budget, and it accounts for a disproportionately large share of voluntary contributions to over 40 UN agencies. In recent months, however, the administration has adopted a cautious stance toward several of the UN's flagship agenda items, including gender equality, diversity, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Against this backdrop, the U.S. government's direct and substantive involvement in arranging the participation of North Korean defectors and officially inviting them to the high-level meeting stands as compelling evidence of its continued strategic interest in the DPRK human rights issue. According to diplomatic sources, it was the United States that initially proposed the inclusion of the high-level plenary meeting in the resolution, with the European Union taking the lead in drafting the text. While the EU spearheaded the resolution's formulation, it was the second Trump administration that played a central role in the diplomatic design and implementation of the event. Despite adopting a reserved posture toward UN budgetary commitments and multilateralism more broadly, the U.S. administration has positioned North Korean human rights as a

strategically linked component of the international security agenda. The May 20 meeting is thus regarded as a concrete manifestation of this strategic approach being translated into actionable policy.

Riley Barnes, a senior official at the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), underscored during the meeting the structural nexus between North Korea's human rights violations and its development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles—both of which pose grave threats to international security. He articulated that the DPRK's weapons programs are not only military in nature but are also built upon a financial infrastructure sustained through egregious human rights abuses, including the exploitation of forced labor both domestically and abroad. In particular, he highlighted how overseas forced labor in sectors such as construction, seafood processing, and the manufacturing of wigs and textiles plays a critical role in financing North Korea's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Furthermore, Barnes pointed to the regime's cyber operations as an emerging threat that fuses digital criminality with systemic repression. He noted that North Korean IT personnel and hacking units engage in ransomware attacks, data theft, and cryptocurrency fraud to generate hard currency revenue—thereby reinforcing the regime's authoritarian control. These points closely reflect the accumulated discourse and concerns long sustained within the North Korean human rights advocacy community. They also demonstrate that the Trump administration has not only been aware of these trends but has actively endorsed the analytical framing that integrates human rights and security considerations in the DPRK context.

## Operationalizing Civil Society–Anchored Diplomacy on North Korean Human Rights

The May 20 meeting is widely regarded as a case in which over two decades of international engagement on North Korean human rights coalesced into a functional multilateral framework through open sessions and multi-layered, closed-door consultations. High-level plenary meetings of the UN General Assembly are typically convened around global-scale issues such as climate change or nuclear security; it is exceedingly rare for such meetings to be dedicated to the internal affairs of a single country. While a similar event addressing DPRK human rights was held in 2014, that meeting was organized not under the auspices of the General Assembly but as a separate initiative by individual member states. By contrast, the 2025 meeting featured not only formal testimonies from national delegates, civil society representatives, and experts but also parallel discussions among a broad range of stakeholders. These engagements facilitated the pre-coordination of key operational and strategic issues in advance. Among the core topics addressed were the structural link between human rights abuses and national security threats posed by North Korea, the regime's illicit revenue streams, its methods of sanctions evasion, and the complicity of external actors including China and Russia. Several of these issues are expected to form the basis for follow-up deliberations in the near future.

The decision to convene the meeting in May—outside the usual high-level week of the UN General Assembly, which typically takes place in September—was itself the result of strategic coordination undertaken during the preparatory process. In anticipation of the forthcoming follow-up report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Commission of Inquiry (COI), civil society organizations and key diplomatic actors

concluded that there was a pressing need to create a timely diplomatic window to raise, on the international stage, the structural linkage between North Korea's forced labor practices, its revenue from cybercrime, and its development of nuclear and missile capabilities. It is understood that this assessment served as the impetus behind the early scheduling of the meeting.

### **Diplomatic Limitations in the Joint Response by North Korea and Allied States**

The unprecedented elevation of the North Korean human rights issue to a high-level plenary session of the UN General Assembly prompted North Korea to pursue coordinated engagement with Russia and China in an apparent attempt to bolster its diplomatic influence in response to the expanded multilateral forum. Multiple member states affiliated with the so-called "Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations" articulated similar positions through oral interventions and written statements during the meeting. Venezuela submitted an official written statement on behalf of the group, while Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Belarus, Russia, Nicaragua, and Laos also expressed their respective positions—both through a joint letter and national-level communications. Russia, Belarus, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, and Nicaragua adopted unequivocally supportive stances toward North Korea, strongly criticizing Western double standards, the politicization of human rights, and the perceived illegitimacy of sanctions. These countries emphasized North Korea's institutional reforms and social achievements as evidence of genuine progress in human rights.

In particular, Russia cited improvements in the DPRK's education, healthcare, and school meal systems, as well as legal reforms, offering a positive evaluation of the regime's efforts. It

underscored the principles of national sovereignty and mutual respect, asserting that sanctions and military pressure are the primary forces undermining the rights of the North Korean people. Russia thereby made clear its unwavering support for the North Korean regime.

China, unlike other states, opted not to submit a written statement but instead voiced its support for North Korea through an oral intervention, while simultaneously limiting its direct engagement with the DPRK delegation. This conduct appeared to reflect a dual strategy: maintaining its traditional ties with Pyongyang while exercising strategic caution in the broader international arena. Cuba, meanwhile, expressed strong support for North Korea during the meeting. However, the once-solid "fraternal" alliance forged during the Kim Il-sung era has shown signs of gradual erosion, attributable to Cuba's pragmatic diplomatic pivot following the normalization of relations with South Korea and the ongoing strain of chronic economic hardship. Laos adopted a markedly different approach. Without explicitly endorsing the North Korean regime or criticizing the West, it employed neutral language emphasizing respect for sovereignty and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) framework. This strategy constituted a principle-based, indirect defense of North Korea's position. Although the tone and method of delivery varied across this spectrum of responses, these states collectively advanced a shared narrative: that human rights should be addressed through a depoliticized framework and that the principle of non-interference in internal affairs should be upheld. This stance functioned as a concerted attempt to counterbalance what they perceive as a Western-dominated human rights discourse. (See Table 1)

Table 1. Comparative Summary of Statements by Member States of the “Group of Friends in Defense of the UN Charter”

Country	Russia	Belarus	Cuba	Equatorial Guinea	Nicaragua	Laos
Warning Against Politicization of Human Rights	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Explicit Defense of DPRK	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	△
Criticism of the West	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
Opposition to Sanctions	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
Emphasis on DPRK’s Achievements	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Support for UPR	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
Emphasis on Neutral Principles	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓

(As of May 22, 2025; based on official records published by the United Nations. China was excluded from the analysis due to the absence of a written statement.)

✓ = Explicitly affirmed

✗ = Not present

△ = Indirect or nuanced expression

The “Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations,” however, occupies a limited position in the international community concerning both normative influence and agenda-setting capacity. The group includes a significant number of states—such as Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, Cuba, Belarus, and Syria—that have long been at the center of allegations of serious human rights violations. While the group consistently advocates for multilateralism, respect for sovereignty, and the principle of non-interference, the credibility of its claims remains weak because many of its member states have themselves violated core tenets of the UN Charter. Moreover, the group has faced persistent criticism for its selective and self-serving

interpretation of the Charter. It frequently invokes sovereignty to reject the expansion of U.S.-led human rights norms, which it labels as unilateralism, thereby distorting the foundational intent of the UN Charter. Although the group generally opposes country-specific human rights resolutions and discussions, its positions appear to shift in accordance with political interests. For example, in March 2025, during the opening session of the 69th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69), Cuba issued a statement on behalf of the group denouncing human rights violations against the Palestinian people—underscoring the group's strategic flexibility in selectively applying its principles.

### **Strategic and Diplomatic Implications**

Given the structural constraints and the DPRK regime's inherent opacity and non-cooperation, the North Korean human rights issue is unlikely to be resolved in the near term. Nonetheless, the international community—including the United Nations, civil society actors, and transnational advocacy networks—continues to monitor the situation closely and to keep the gravity of the issue on the global agenda. The recent high-level meeting further affirmed that the Trump administration continues to perceive North Korean human rights violations as a multidimensional threat intrinsically linked to international security. On the day of the meeting, May 20, the administration issued a statement designating the Cuban regime as “illegitimate” and denouncing its longstanding record of repression and human rights abuses. This gesture suggests a consistent diplomatic posture whereby similar authoritarian regimes are subjected to the same normative standards within U.S. foreign policy. In light of these international dynamics, the Republic of Korea must strengthen its strategic alignment with allied democracies and take a proactive role in forthcoming consultations. This would enable Seoul to secure

tangible influence within the evolving international normative framework and the reconfiguration of global diplomatic norms surrounding North Korean human rights. At the same time, the South Korean government must consistently articulate its position by framing North Korean human rights as a matter of universal concern. It should integrate a wide array of policy instruments—ranging from civil and political rights to economic and social rights, from pressure mechanisms to humanitarian assistance, and multilateral forums to bilateral channels—within a coherent, balanced strategy that reflects the complexity of the challenge and the necessity for differentiated roles among key actors.

*The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of INSS.*