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North Korea sanctions punish the whole population

October 10th, 2013

Author: Emma Campbell, ANU

Herbert Hoover once said of sanctions that ‘they bred “incurable hatreds”’. On a recent trip to the DPRK those hatreds were much in evidence as our

interlocutors blamed international sanctions (more commonly ‘US sanctions’) as the root cause of the North’s current woes. [A recent UN report](#) by the Honourable Michael Kirby on the ‘unspeakable atrocities’ faced by many prisoners in North Korea’s camps confirms what most followers of Korea already knew about the wretched regime. But life in the DPRK is tough for everyone except for a tiny Pyongyang elite. The sanctions regime in place to curtail North Korea’s nuclear program and to tackle the appalling human rights record now threatens to make the lives of the most vulnerable even worse.



Let’s be clear — responsibility for the DPRK’s current predicament lies squarely at the feet of the North Korean [regime](#). The regime’s domestic policies have crippled the North’s [economy](#) and its belligerent behaviour appears to have exasperated even its purported ally, [China](#). But that does not take the international community off the hook. This is a world of international rights and norms. When constructing policy toward the DPRK there is a responsibility to prevent a worsening of the plight of the North Korean people. It appears that the ongoing sanctions regime is failing in this basic humanitarian tenet.

The current [sanctions](#) have not only failed to curtail the [nuclear ambitions](#) and human rights abuses of the ambitious North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, they are also constraining the actions of humanitarian NGOs trying to carry out life-saving activities inside the DPRK. These essential humanitarian activities include the provision of nutritional supplements to malnourished children; the treatment of infectious diseases, such as drug-resistant tuberculosis; the provision of support to rural villages; and the delivery of basic medicines, such as antibiotics and pain relief.

Because of sanctions targeted at banks dealing with the DPRK, one European diplomat told me that humanitarian agencies had resorted to carrying large amounts of cash into the DPRK in order to maintain basic operations. The remittance of funds to UN agencies and embassies operating in North Korea is being hampered. Other NGOs, including the German humanitarian organisation Welthungerhilfe, have spoken openly about the impact of sanctions and are considering withdrawal from the DPRK because they are unable to carry out their projects. Even small individual gestures are being blocked — the Japanese government, for example, continues to tighten restrictions on the sending of gifts and financial support by Koreans living in Japan to their suffering relatives in the DPRK.

The sanctions regime against Iraq following its invasion of Kuwait provides lessons for the contemporary case of North Korea. Certainly sanctions contributed to a weakening of Iraq's military capacity as a result of the comprehensive trade embargo that was imposed in 1990. And it was Saddam Hussein's unwillingness to work with the UN to provide humanitarian relief that compounded the effect of sanctions on the general population. However, credible estimates suggest that over 200,000 Iraqi children died as a result of the sanctions regime. The regime also dramatically weakened Iraq's social and economic system and inspired extreme antipathy toward the West. It is not a big leap to suggest that the long-term impact of these sanctions imposed by the international community added to the complexities of reconstruction and peace building following the 2003 US-led invasion.

While sanctions against the DPRK are proving more symbolic than effective in their current form, there is a case for some targeted sanctions around the North's nuclear program and the leadership's luxurious lifestyle. Indeed, the current sanctions were said to be targeted, or 'smart', but the broad reach of the sanctions regime, the determination to rigidly enforce these sanctions and the fear held by many institutions of even carrying out legal transactions with the DPRK is constraining the ability of humanitarian agencies to conduct life-saving activities.

Iraq has taught us that the potential long-term consequences of sanctions should be measured against any short-term gains. In the case of the DPRK those long-term consequences may include yet another generation of stunted children, communities facing starvation, increased criminality, environmental disasters and a drug-resistant tuberculosis epidemic.

History has also shown that sanctions may lead to increased sympathy for the incumbent regime. The feeling of embattlement can lead to a 'rallying' effect by a population. That belief, albeit fed by domestic propaganda, will become easier to cultivate as more NGOs find themselves reducing their operations as a result of the embargo. And so the international community, too easily cast as the cause of the DPRK's woes, will eventually find itself at the receiving end of Hoover's foretold 'incurable hatreds'.

Dr Emma Campbell is a postdoctoral fellow at the [Strategic and Defence Studies Centre](#), the Australian National University.

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- [Joshua Stanton](#)

14th October, 2013, 12:55 am

While the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation was complaining about the delay in fund transfers last spring, Kim Jong Un was trying spend more than \$7M on Swiss ski lift equipment to build himself his own ski resort. Ironically, [that amount is almost as much as SADC's annual budget for North Korea](#). Imagine all the good SADC might have done if its budget had been doubled! If Kim Jong Un has that kind of cash laying around for his own lifestyle—but not to feed his people—why is anyone but Kim Jong Un responsible for the starvation of North Koreans?

I have yet to hear a peep from any of the European NGOs and well-meaning foreign academics in protest against this criminal deprivation of the right to food and other necessities of life. Perhaps they take [Kim Jong Un's view](#) that the real human rights violation is the refusal to sell him ski lift equipment. More likely, their implicit bargain with the regime is that their access is a function of being its mouthpieces.

In fact, foreign NGOs have NEVER had enough free access to North Korea's population to properly assess their needs or feed those whose need is greatest. Instead, the regime forces most aid to go through government channels, which divert much of it to regime loyalists and soldiers.

Treasury sanctioned the Foreign Trade Bank of North Korea because Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un willfully and repeatedly used it for proliferation of

WMDs in violation of multiple U.N. Security Council Resolutions—maybe even for the acceptance of payment for the chemical weapons technology that killed scores of children in Syria. North Korea also forces foreign NGOs — the ones that feed the North Koreans that Kim Jong Un won't feed — to use that same bank. In other words, Kim Jong Un uses the people of North Korea as human shields for financing proliferation. That's a pretty neat trick, especially because it wouldn't work without the assistance of well-meaning foreign NGOs who are feeding only a tiny fraction of North Korea's hungry, and who are ultimately doing more to prolong North Korea's misery than end it.

[Just ask Medecins San Frontieres.](#)

It is true that sanctions have not disarmed North Korea, but false that they haven't worked. In fact, the UN says that they have slowed the rate of North Korea's proliferation, and this despite the fact that we have never applied the full weight of banking sanctions—the most effective kind—to North Korea. Banking sanctions worked in Burma and Sudan, and are proving devastating against Iran. They were devastating against Kim Jong Il's proliferation and money laundering network for the one-year period when we tried them, between 2005 and 2006. Those sanctions forced Kim Jong Il to return to talks and agree to disarm (only to renege later, after sanctions had been lifted).

Our sanctions against North Korea are far today weaker than those against Iran and Syria. If you want to prevent war in North Korea and help the people of North Korea, you ought to call for a global campaign to freeze Kim Jong Un's billions of dollars in ill-gotten wealth in European and Chinese banks, to confiscate those funds, and to use them exclusively for bulk shipments of humanitarian aid to North Korea instead of yachts, luxury sedans, centrifuge components, and ski lift equipment.

[Reply](#)

- *Emma Campbell*
17th October, 2013, 6:32 pm

Many thanks for your comment Joshua. I do agree with some of the points you make – anger around the leadership's spending on luxury items while the population continues to face chronic malnutrition, poor sanitation and a collapsed health system. And as a former field worker with Médecins sans Frontières I particularly share your frustrations about the unwillingness of the DPRK regime to allow unfettered access to the population. This is the case in many of the countries where NGOs like MSF work. In these situations, the goal of a humanitarian NGO is to bring relief to a suffering population without perpetuating the system that is causing the suffering – 'first do no harm'. My assessment of the evidence is that humanitarian aid during the famine was successful in alleviating some of the suffering without sustaining the regime (see for example Haggard and Noland; Schwekendiek; Smith. See also Reilly on more recent Chinese engagement with the North). Schwekendiek in particular is very persuasive through his use of quantitative methods to demonstrate a net health benefit to the population of the aid programme in the 1990s. With regards to MSF, there are competing views inside MSF as to whether they should have withdrawn and whether MSF should now re-establish projects inside the DPRK.

On your comment that 'well-meaning foreign NGOs...are ultimately doing more to prolong North Korea's misery than end it', as a former field worker the idea that we should sacrifice people suffering today with the uncertain hope that this will cause the regime to fall is a policy that I do not support or accept. I also reject the suggestion implied in your response that those of us who wish to bring change through engagement are apologists for the regime. Those who promote engagement share a goal similar to yours – to achieve political and social change in the DPRK, to

end human rights abuses in all forms, and to bring political, economic and social freedom to the people of North Korea. Indeed, I came to this work via the human rights track – I was part of the team that published the first two English language White Papers on Human Rights reports by the Database Centre for North Korean Human Rights, a respected human rights organisation in Seoul.

Many thanks for your comprehensive discussion about sanctions. My analysis of the effect of sanctions in the case of Iran, Sudan and Burma – and of course North Korea – would be different from yours, although my argument in this piece was not against sanctions per se, but on how they are applied. There is a lot of interesting comparative research being done on Burma-DPRK (including the efficacy of sanctions) which could inform the work of people like you and I hoping to achieve the same openness in the DPRK that we see today in Burma.

Fundamentally, however, our approach differs in that I believe the evidence suggests engagement will bring about political and social change in the DPRK, and you believe in an isolation policy. As such, broad sanctions that dissuade from contact and engagement – in my view – will perpetuate the regime rather than bring about its demise and in the meantime, may lead to humanitarian and social decay in the North and a population antagonistic to the international community.

I have seen your website, and it would be good to discuss some of the points you raise in more detail outside of this forum. I certainly think that those of us on opposite sides of the debate should correspond more – after all we all care passionately about the Korean peninsula and hope to achieve a similar outcome for the people of the DPRK. Thanks again for taking time to respond Joshua!

[Reply](#)

- *Dennis O'Connell*
22nd October, 2013, 8:33 am

South Korea tried engagement for ten years in the sunshine policy (1998-08: it achieved nothing. The South gave the North over 7 billion dollars and didn't even get a thank you. The North still attacked the South over the northern limit line several times. The money helped the Kim family regime to stay in power and build weapons that they might use to kill citizens of South Korea. The North holds hundreds of citizens from the South they seized and all their aid did not free a single person. The South Korean left is anti-American and pro-North Korean and they make up around 25 per cent of the population and grow in numbers every year thanks to the leftist teacher unions in the South.

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