



Challenges in Applying Economic Pressure Against North Korea by Scott Savitz

The North Korean regime presents numerous hazards to U.S. interests in Northeast Asia and elsewhere. It poses a continuing threat to key U.S. allies, and has disseminated weapons of mass destruction and missile technology to other nations, while pursuing its own advanced programs in these areas.

The U.S. has limited options for addressing the North Korean threat. Military options are hindered by North Korea's potentially fearsome retaliatory capabilities, and by concerns that any military action could lead to confrontation with China. Economic options offer more promise, insofar as they are used to shape North Korean behavior. The North Korean regime is desperately trying to strengthen its critically weak economy. Offering economic rewards for cooperation on key issues, with the promise of sanctions if such cooperation is not forthcoming, may influence its government's behavior. Economic tools may be particularly effective with regard to WMD and missile proliferation. While it is difficult to ascertain the reasons behind North Korean actions, it is likely that the country's willingness to proliferate technologies to its ideological opponents (such as Iran) stems at least partly from economic motives. The U.S. and its allies could negate the incentive to proliferate by fine-tuned economic tools, some of which could be coordinated with Chinese authorities. (Despite China's past involvement in proliferation, increasing concerns about the Islamic world may increase its willingness to curb North Korean proliferation.)

That said, there are a couple of critical caveats when thinking about economic sanctions. The first is that such sanctions can easily result in more dangerous behavior by North Korea if they do not take into account the overall structure of North Korean incentives. For example, one of the more tempting targets for sanctions is the hard currency remitted by ethnic Koreans in Japan. However, depriving North Korea of this currency will only make it more desperate to seek alternative means of acquiring funds; its proliferation and other illegal activities would be likely to increase. It is important to frame the situation correctly from North Korea's perspective: if it reduces its proliferation of WMD and missiles, it will be able to continue to receive funds from its supporters in Japan.

The second caveat involves the strategic use of sanctions to induce regime change. It is tempting to believe that sanctions, if applied intensely enough, could inflict such dire economic consequences on North Korea that its people would rise up against their government. However, applying such pressures upon North Korea could actually reinforce the regime's authority, while weakening the population's resolve to undertake any form of rebellion.

Populations afflicted by hunger have rarely risen up to overthrow their governments, however oppressive those governments have been. For example, neither the Soviet famine of the 1930s nor the famine caused by the "Great Leap Forward" in China (1958-60) induced large-scale peasant revolts. Though Ireland experienced many rebellions from the 17th through the early 20th centuries, the potato famine of the 1840s did not induce a popular uprising (despite contemporary revolts across continental Europe). Despite a number of famines in British-governed India, these were almost never coupled with Indian revolts against British rule; rather, seditious activities followed an independent timeline.

The failure of starving populations to revolt, in these and other examples, can be explained in terms of basic human behavior when food is scarce. Starving people lack the energy or interest to engage in any concerns but the immediate struggle to survive. Overthrowing a government is never an instantaneous process, and the benefits of doing so are almost inevitably beyond the time-horizon of those who are most aggrieved. Unless it is apparent that the government is deliberately preventing access to existing food supplies, it is unlikely that the hungry will seek a violent solution to their troubles. On the contrary, they are more liable to seek official favor by any means possible, including the betrayal of anyone who may have been uttering sedition.

It is unlikely that attempts to further impoverish North Korea would induce a popular revolution against its regime. Starving people make unlikely rebels. Even if they were to present the highly unusual specter of a revolt, they would be easily crushed by well-fed soldiers (whose government appears to have no compunction about inflicting harm on its own population). However meager North Korea's resources may be, it will always be able to find some way in which to feed its minions.

As such, economic sanctions may be used to influence North Korean behavior, but are unlikely to be useful in inducing actual regime change. On the contrary, they are likely to make North Koreans ever more dependent upon their government for basic sustenance. Similar effects were visible in Iraq during the 1990s, when Iraqis' reliance on ration cards made them vulnerable to government strictures. The idea that North Koreans can be freed through externally imposed impoverishment is almost certainly a specious one, and one that distracts from more fundamentally grounded efforts to address the threats which North Korea embodies.

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