



THE DESTRUCTION OF NORTH KOREAN AGRICULTURE: WE NEED TO RETHINK UN SANCTIONS

BY HAZEL SMITH

Hazel Smith (hs50@soas.ac.uk) PhD FRSA is Professorial Research Associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London; Professor Emerita of International Security, Cranfield University, UK; Member Global Futures Council on Korea World Economic Forum and Fellow, Wilson Center, Washington DC.

In 2016 and 2017, in response to North Korea's continued nuclear testing, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) expanded sanctions that had previously been targeted at commodities, individuals, and institutions linked to the nuclear and missile sector to sanctions measures that no longer differentiated between the civilian and the military sectors. The 2017 [UNSC sanctions](#) included a ban on the import of natural gas and condensates; a cap on crude oil imports to 4 million barrels a year and refined oil product imports, which includes diesel and kerosene, to half a million barrels a year. Military sector oil imports, including rocket fuel, were already prohibited by the [Wassenaar Arrangement](#), prior UN sanctions and bilateral Chinese export controls, so the impact of the UN oil sanctions fell disproportionately on the civilian economy.

North Korea has no indigenous sources of oil and natural gas and therefore depends on imported energy inputs to produce fertilizer and pesticides, to fuel irrigation equipment and agricultural machinery and to transport agricultural inputs including seeds, crops, equipment, spare parts, and labor. Given the UN prohibitions on essential energy imports, it should be no surprise that in 2018 North Korea's agricultural production [collapsed](#) to levels similar to those of the [famine years](#) of the 1990s.

Under international law, the North Korean government has primary responsibility for the welfare of its population but that does not mean that outside

actors like the UN do not also hold responsibilities. No government or international organization may use the excuse of the wrongdoing of governments to inflict further harm on innocents living in that government's territory. In war time, the destruction of agriculture in an enemy territory is a war crime.

The [Geneva Conventions](#) state that it "is prohibited to attack, destroy, remove, or render useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies, and irrigation works... whatever the motive."

North Korea [needs around](#) 5 and a half million tons of cereal a year to feed its people, at subsistence levels. In the 1990s, between a third and two-thirds of a million people lost their lives in the midst of economic collapse and the devastation of North Korea's agricultural sector. Crop production recovered to the extent that between 2012 and 2016, domestic food production, averaged around 5 million tons a year. The food gap was filled from a more or less even split between commercial imports and food aid. In total, recorded imports hovered at around half a million tonnes a year, increasing, after a reduced harvest in 2017, to an import requirement of just over three-quarters of a million tons for 2018, as sanctions tightened.

Improved agricultural production combined with a manageable food import requirement had been accompanied by significant improvements in child nutrition. By 2017, [according to UNICEF](#), North Korean children, whether in terms of stunting (a sign of long term poor nutrition) or wasting (a sign of starvation conditions) on average were significantly and measurably better off than if they had lived in other poor Asian counties like Nepal or even some wealthier countries in Asia, like Pakistan, India, and the Philippines.

In 2018, after the implementation of energy sanctions, agricultural production fell to just over 4 million tonnes, leaving an enormous food deficit of 1 and a half million tonnes in 2019. Put another way, if the only food available in 2019 had been from domestic food production, only about two-thirds of the 25 million population could have received even a basic subsistence level ration. There was no humanitarian crisis in 2019 because China and Russia stepped up with massive food aid as well as fertilizer and pesticide support and, very likely, [ignored sanctions limits](#) on oil exports to the DPRK.

Even prior to UN energy sanctions, the North Korean economy was [getting by](#) with globally low levels of oil inputs; the 25 million population was second only to the Democratic People's Republic of Congo as the lowest per capita consumers of oil in the world. The UNSC December 2017 limit on refined oil imports to 500,000 barrels *a year* is less than Australia, an oil producer itself and with a similar size population to the DPRK, imports in *one day*. Agriculture in North Korea is founded on hard physical labour, mainly by women, because of the nationwide lack of technology and farm equipment. Nevertheless, there is a limit to how much human labour can substitute for the diesel that is necessary to transport crops and labour from one place to another or the natural gas and oil products necessary to produce the fertilizer and pesticides to ensure adequate yields from insufficient land and inhospitable terrain.

Neither the United Nations nor the member states have a road map that sets out how the goal of DPRK denuclearization will be achieved by sanctions that target the civilian economy. Perhaps the UNSC assumption is that the people will rise up and overturn the government if conditions get tougher. Yet North Korea is, by almost any criteria, including GNI in total or per capita, one of the poorest countries in the world. In destroying agricultural production, the 2017 sanctions have made day-to-day life a literal struggle for the physical survival of families and communities, which does not leave time, opportunity, capacity, or motivation for individuals to also risk their lives by expressing political criticism of a security-focused authoritarian government.

In 2003 the UN had abandoned non-targeted sanctions because of the many well-attested reports from internationally respected health professionals that showed how non-targeted sanctions did not discriminate between innocents and wrong-doers and had caused the deaths of millions of children in Iraq and Haiti. The United Nations Security Council cannot excuse itself through a bureaucratic insertion of "humanitarian exemptions" in its resolutions. The loss of agricultural production destroys farmers' capacity to grow food in future years. The scope and scale of North Korea's food production losses could only be compensated by what would have to be the largest and most expensive food aid operation in the world. No member state is seriously proposing this as an option. Ethically, it is also a rather grotesque idea that the same organization that destroyed the population's ability to feed itself should offer "humanitarian" aid as recompense.

In 2020 [China](#) and [Russia](#) face coronavirus. If the disease damages their own agricultural production cycle or if they decide they need to keep their oil and cereal stocks at home to protect against the economic uncertainties brought by the global pandemic then, while energy sanctions continue, the North Korean population will again face the threat of starvation. The UN's own agencies that have been resident and working in North Korea for 25 years and more, especially the FAO and the WFP, have already documented how these new sanctions have brought back a level of food insecurity unknown since the famine years.

This is the start of the agricultural season in North Korea. At least until the UNSC has brought forward a detailed impact study of sanctions on food security, oil, and energy sanctions should be suspended.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.