



**RESPONSE TO PACNET #24, “THE
DESTRUCTION OF NORTH KOREAN
AGRICULTURE: WE NEED TO
RETHINK UN SANCTIONS”**

BY JAMES A. KELLY AND
HAZEL SMITH

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James A. Kelly replies:

Professor Hazel Smith has long been respected for her economic analysis of North Korea. Her recent [PacNet 24](#) shows the possibility of serious outcomes but is incomplete in both economic and geopolitical terms.

The United Nations Security Council of 2017 and 2018 imposed sanctions after serious deliberation amid a climate of frustration. North Korea had tested nuclear weapons even more destructive than the devices leading to earlier sanctions. Many of those previous sanctions were aimed—with scant visible success—at North Korean elites. Major new, long-range missiles were introduced and tested, making targets of millions more people, theoretically including all of the United States. The Security Council—correctly believing that war is not the answer and must not be fought—hammered out new sanctions with the participation of China and Russia. The offense was great, and the sanctions were

intended to be harsh. But would they motivate Kim Jong-un and his prosperous acolytes?

Prof. Smith, using published sources, notes possible serious effects on North Korea’s agriculture. She notes the primary responsibility—of North Korea’s government—even though that government only exists under the tolerance of the ruling Workers’ Party of Korea, its leader, his relatives, and their chosen elites.

Those elites are, even now, making choices that make agricultural failure even more likely. They ignore primary—or any—responsibility. The coronavirus pandemic has caused North Korea to take action—action taken often before and for many reasons—to close off the country. There are credible reports of thousands of tons of cargo sitting in Chinese depots, not moving, perhaps because of North Korea’s border closings. Various Western NGOs have offered to help and are being rejected or ignored. And South Korea’s newly re-empowered President Moon Jae-in—who has gone far beyond any other South Korean leader to help North Korea—has tried and tried and received rebuff after rebuff.

Furthermore, if a new crisis of mass hunger begins, the effects are likely to be less serious than the terrible days of the 1990s. The total failure of the collective farms and the food distribution system of that period has empowered—despite party efforts—hundreds of vibrant local markets to take root and for thousands of small private agricultural plots to emerge and endure. These efforts rarely appear in statistics—such as they are from Pyongyang—but are substantial.

Prof. Smith notes twice that North Korea is a poor country—even very poor—and contrasts it with countries with broad poverty. There is an important difference. North Korea has education and technology far greater than countries such as Nepal or many of the African states with large populations that have always been poor. No country with North Korea’s levels of development has ever experienced the kind of famine that took place in the 1990s. The starvation was because of the choices made by the leadership, whose ruthless suppression restrains outside help and prohibits prosperity among those deemed politically unreliable.

The Security Council should—each year—review its sanctions. It should seek to avoid punishing those who have done no wrong. But these sanctions were imposed for valid reasons and—as we have seen in recent weeks—North Korea does not want tensions to ease. So, it closes its borders to the pandemic but tests new missiles.

Hazel Smith responds to James A. Kelly:

I start by welcoming Assistant Secretary of State Kelly's response to my recent PacNet commentary that called for a re-think on UN energy sanctions on North Korea. I have enormous respect for Secretary Kelly's considerable achievements in public service and as a distinguished representative of his country. I admire particularly his diplomatic leadership in negotiations with the DPRK in the face of what was at the time an extraordinarily difficult negotiating environment. Given the space available, my comments necessarily focus on the differences between us; that should not be taken to imply disagreement on more fundamental goals which I take to be of supporting the goal of material prosperity and political freedoms for the North Korean population and a peaceful, stable, denuclearized peninsula.

On the specifics, it might be useful if I first correct a factual misunderstanding in Secretary Kelly's piece; secondly, if I restate my core ethical question, which remains unanswered; and, thirdly, summarize the outstanding policy dilemma.

There are two aspects to food security: food availability and food accessibility. In any country, food availability comes from only two sources; domestic production and food imports. Markets do not increase food availability; they provide food accessibility through their function as allocators and distributors of what food is available. Nor has total food availability in North Korea been greatly enhanced by production on private plots and unregulated expansion into mountain and forest lands. In agricultural marketing year 2016-17, prior to the implementation of recent sanctions, garden and slope production was estimated at about 300,000 tons, compared to about 5 million tons produced on the big farms, mostly in the breadbasket plains of the country, in the same year. Those proportions would be about

the same even were North Korea to change its economic system. As in the US and all agriculturally productive countries, small farms can provide added value in niche sectors, but it is the large agro-industrial farms that today provide for mass populations.

Reorganized systems likely would improve productivity but only if they can first access the imported oil-based inputs essential for the production of fertilizer and pesticides, the operation of farm equipment, including irrigation facilities and threshing machines, and the transport of equipment, crops and labor. No matter whether agriculture is organized around efficient capitalist methods or inefficient command economy mechanisms, crop production everywhere in the world is dependent on to oil-based inputs, which increase yields and therefore output. Given the DPRK has no indigenous oil and natural gas, that means North Korean farmers are wholly dependent on imports. These essential imports are, however, banned or severely curtailed by the 2017 sanctions.

Secretary Kelly is quite right that markets are the primary source of food for North Koreans. Providing one has money to sell and buy, markets have provided nimble distribution networks that the government could not and did not provide in the famine years of the 1990s. Market distribution still requires, however, food to distribute.

Then there is the ethical question. There is a global consensus that North Korea's government, which, as Secretary Kelly is again correct to emphasize, primarily represents the families that constitute the political elite, violates numerous international laws and represses its population. Irrespective of the wrongdoing of a government, however, it remains unethical and illegal (the UN has the legal "responsibility to protect") to impose sanctions that disproportionately harm innocents. This is where the analogy to the Geneva Conventions is useful. The targeting of food production and food supply to a population in enemy territory is specifically forbidden. It seems perverse to think that such activities in peacetime should be permitted.

And, finally, the policy issue.

So far there is no road map, no impact study and no study of the potential impact of UN sanctions on the population of the DPRK. This is perhaps because we are constantly told, by commentary that is often itself speculative, ill-informed, or amounts to not much more than personal opinion, that there is no reliable factual basis to assess this country. True, we don't know much about, for example, internal Kim family dynamics, but we do know a lot about the energy, agricultural, and nutrition sectors. On the former we have robust data and sophisticated analysis from, among others, Peter Hayes of the Nautilus Institute and, on the latter, substantive, data-rich studies from the Korea Development Institute, the Rural Development Commission in South Korea, and several UN agencies—including the Food and Agricultural Organization, World Food Program, UNICEF, United Nations Development Program, World Health Organization, United Nations Population Fund, and UN Environment Program—that have operated inside North Korea for now over two decades.

It's difficult for honorable people who are justifiably angry with a government that represses its people and refuses to adhere to international law, to acknowledge that not all actions against such a bad actor are ethically justified. My view is that it's necessary to distinguish between the government and the population. Drawing from my time working and living in North Korea, in nurseries, schools, orphanages, flood rehabilitation works, farms, hospitals, and local communities, I saw many, many unselfish and compassionate actions by North Koreans just trying to do their best for the communities they served in the face of an out of touch and unaccountable government. These people don't deserve to be punished twice; once from their government and again by the outside world.

In democracies, unlike in North Korea, we have the privilege of and therefore the responsibility to hold our governments to account for actions they take in our name. Given the impact on food security, we need to know how precisely do UN policymakers envisage that sanctions on the civilian economy will lead to the desired political outcome of denuclearization? And, if UN energy sanctions are to continue, the UN and the

member states need to own the policy and be up-front about its consequences for millions of innocents.

NB: For those interested in the data and analysis underpinning my observations in these PacNet commentaries, please see Hazel Smith, 'The ethics of United Nations sanctions on North Korea: Effectiveness, necessity and proportionality', *Critical Asian Studies*, forthcoming 2020.

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