



## Expanding Sanctions Won't Halt North Korea's Nuclear Program

Doug Bandow

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The war in Ukraine has increased fear of conflict in the Asia-Pacific. China has threatened to force reunification with Taiwan, which could trigger war with the US. However, North Korea might be even more dangerous. It is speeding development of a nuclear deterrent to America. That is, building nuclear weapons and long-range missiles (ICBMs) to target cities across the US.

Unfortunately, the Biden administration has no policy toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, let alone a strategy to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. Other than to beg Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un to negotiate, pleadings which he has assiduously ignored. After the collapse of the 2019 Hanoi summit between Kim and President Donald Trump, the former apparently decided that he would get no sanctions relief without abandoning his nukes, and simply stopped talking to the US, South Korea, and most everyone else. Indeed, the silence extends well beyond government offices. Immediately afterwards DPRK diplomats at the UN mission canceled a scheduled meeting with me – and continue to refuse to meet.

Without even the barest communication, US policy appears to be at a dead end, without a serious alternative.

Military action would be a cure worse than the disease, likely triggering a rerun of the Korean War which Washington and Seoul have spent nearly 70 years attempting to deter. Support for war is minimal, other than by an irresponsible fringe, perhaps best represented these days by Sen. Lindsey Graham, who once dismissed concerns over nuclear war on the peninsula since it would be "over there." In his view, "If thousands die, they're going to die over there. They're not going to die here." His easygoing attitude toward potentially millions of casualties from a widespread North Korean nuclear attack gained few adherents in America and even fewer in the Republic of Korea.

Even before the North acquired its nuclear arsenal South Korean officials resisted American proposals for preventive strikes since the risk of even conventional retaliation against Seoul was too great. Today the DPRK is far more dangerous. For instance, just a handful of strikes with

WMDs, including biological and chemical weapons, would wreak enormous havoc on the South, Northeast Asia, and potentially on American territory as well.

The other oft-proposed panacea is sanctions. More sanctions. Tougher sanctions. Better enforced sanctions. Successive administrations have desperately sought this fabled unicorn. The Obama administration may have come closest after winning support from China and Russia. The United Nations then targeted the North's export industries, significantly slowing the North Korean economy. However, the DPRK still refused to yield.

Once Kim and Trump agreed to hold their first summit, the People's Republic of China shifted course to avoid being cut out by a US-North Korea deal. President Xi Jinping held a rapid succession of chummy summits with Kim, and since has effectively backed the North's position.

Moreover, Washington's relationships with both China and Russia have dramatically deteriorated. American ties with the latter, highlighted by an ongoing proxy war in Ukraine, have fallen to Cold War levels. The US-PRC relationship is not far behind. Although the Biden administration has attempted to initiate a dialogue missing during the latter Trump years, China will not be inclined to do anything to advance American policy. Although Beijing and Moscow want neither a nuclear North Korea nor an unstable Northeast Asia, both view the North as a useful weapon against the US.

China and Russia have rejected new UN sanctions over the North's 31 missile tests so far this year. Less certain is how they would react to a nuclear test. But they are unlikely to agree to any measures, such as a cutoff of energy and food, that might threaten the North Korean regime. And the Kim dynasty has proved to be quite resilient. In the late 1990s Kim's father persevered despite years of famine that killed at least a half million people. More than two years ago Kim essentially sanctioned his own country, isolating it to prevent COVID's spread. In the past, the PRC always balanced its support for denuclearization against its desire for stability. Today the latter position has been strengthened by Beijing's evident hostility toward Washington.

So what to do?

Aaron Arnold of the Royal United Services Institute says, sanction the PRC and Russia!

He is outraged by the mundane, the unsurprising rejection of Washington's demands by its two most powerful potential adversaries. Arnold wrote: "In the nearly five years since the Security Council last imposed new sanctions, both Russia and China have stymied even the most modest of efforts to update and amend international sanctions against North Korea. Last month, both countries vetoed a resolution put forward by the United States that would have further tightened sanctions on North Korea in response to the country's continued provocations and ballistic missile tests. China's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Zhao Lijian, hinted at China's unwillingness to seek new sanctions should North Korea conduct another nuclear test."

All true. However, surely this is to be expected. No one would imagine the US enforcing similar sanctions on Israel, an undeclared nuclear power, even if approved by the United Nations. Washington would view such a measure as undermining America's (and certainly American

politicians' political) interests. At which point any consideration of international law and obligation would instantly dissipate.

Nevertheless, in Arnold's view, "if Western countries are serious about their international nuclear nonproliferation commitments, they must hold Russia and China accountable for failing to uphold theirs. Russia and China's abrogation of responsibility should be met with secondary sanctions against their domestic institutions if they turn a blind eye to North Korea's sanctions-evading and revenue-generating activities."

Doing so would be dramatic. It would make US officials, who specialize in long, loquacious bouts of sanctimony, feel good. But it wouldn't move denuclearization forward.

First, sanctions have an extraordinarily poor record of forcing governments to abandon what they believe to be important or vital interests. Successive administrations targeted Sudan, which changed only after an internal revolution. The Trump administration imposed "maximum pressure" on Iran, Syria, and Venezuela, and failed to force any of these governments to surrender. China, Russia, and Cuba ignored lesser economic penalties, the latter for more than six decades and counting. And when North Korea was convinced that winning sanctions relief would require full denuclearization, it essentially stopped talking to the US and ROK. So much for using economic coercion to force political concessions.

Second, piling sanction upon sanction undermines their effectiveness, reducing the likelihood that they might affect a state's behavior. Today Russia has nothing to lose from more US sanctions. Much of its economy is under sanctions anyway, so the threat to add more penalties is no threat at all. And the more conditions set to achieve sanctions relief, the less likely compliance becomes.

The PRC prefers to avoid being targeted, but in recent years has faced increasing allied penalties on a number of individuals and institutions. In North Korea's case it likely would sacrifice a few companies and banks rather than cave to Washington's demands. Moreover, more sanctions would spur its efforts to adopt strategies limiting its vulnerability to US economic pressure. Washington's promiscuous misuse of its economic influence also has sparked interest in reducing dollar reliance by Russia, India and other BRICs members, Middle Eastern countries, and even European states.

Third, with multiple issues in play involving both Moscow and Beijing, the US cannot easily prioritize North Korea. In the case of Russia, its war with Ukraine is the most important issue for Washington to address. Moscow might insist on lifting allied sanctions as part of any peace settlement. In such a case, Washington would not likely risk the deal to continue penalizing the North.

China involves an even more complex mix of issues. There are multiple security concerns, especially Taiwan and territorial claims concentrated in the South China Sea; a complex array of human rights issues; a diverse collection of economic controversies, ranging from trade to IP theft to industrial policy to cyber theft; international economic and diplomatic activities, such as the Belt and Road Initiative; attempts to influence the political systems of allied nations; and

more. The US cannot expect to have its way on all of them. Indeed, the more Washington demands Chinese compliance, the greater Beijing's resistance is likely to be. Where does the DPRK fit among them?

Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to "the North Korea problem." As a shrimp among whales the North unsurprisingly believes that nukes are important for its survival. Certainly, regime elites appear convinced that nuclear weapons contribute to the survival of Pyongyang's ruling class. Which requires the US to try a different strategy.

Drop restrictions on travel to the North. Although North Korean COVID restrictions remain, this step would respond to Pyongyang's routine complaint of US "hostility" and prepare the way for future US visitors. The Biden administration also should propose establishing diplomat relations. It is more important to talk to adversaries, especially when they have nuclear weapons, than friends.

Most important, Washington should indicate that it is willing to pick up where Kim and Trump parted. Although the US should reiterate that its official objective remains denuclearization, the administration should indicate that it is willing to proceed step-by-step, lifting sanctions while limiting the DPRK's nuclear program. Even partial progress would make the region and America safer. Beijing might be willing to encourage this process, which would reduce Chinese nuclear fears and promote border stability.

Advocates of sanctions never give up. Every failure is explained away as resulting from "too little" – not enough penalties on enough countries, people, companies, products, transactions, and activities for enough time. The answer therefore is simple: More! And the cycle repeats. Endlessly. See Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, and the DPRK.

Alas, time may be running out in dealing with Pyongyang. "The North Korea problem" may soon go critical. Last year [the Rand Corporation and Asan Institute](#) predicted "that, by 2027, North Korea could have 200 nuclear weapons and several dozen intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and hundreds of theater missiles for delivering the nuclear weapons." Facing a significant DPRK nuclear deterrent capable of targeting America cities, US policymakers would find themselves in a very different world.

Unfortunately, more sanctions, whether on North Korea, China and Russia, or all three won't change that. Washington needs to try a different approach. Now.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of several books, including [Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World](#) and co-author of [The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea](#).*