

## Sanctions won't convince North Korea to denuclearize

The current sanctions regime has its limits, even if the US could convince China, Russia and others to fully enforce it

[Doug Bandow](#) August 31, 2021



Image: [Eric Lafforgue](#) | North Korean pioneer passing in front of a missile monument at a school in South Hamgyong Province in Sept. 2012

For decades, American presidents have said that North Korea cannot have nuclear weapons. And for decades, North Korea has continued adding more to its arsenal.

Estimates of North Korea's capabilities vary: Informed estimates vary from as few as [10](#) to as many as [116](#). Truly fearsome are estimates of what might come. The [Rand Corporation and Asan Institute](#) recently warned that by 2027 North Korea could have close to 250 nuclear weapons and "several dozen intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and hundreds of theater missiles for delivering the nuclear weapons."

Such an arsenal [would match](#) that of the United Kingdom and exceed those of Pakistan, India and Israel — in just six years. Pyongyang's WMD advances almost certainly put a military solution to the problem off the table.

Unfortunately, diplomacy with North Korea has failed in recent years, and prospects for future success appear dim. This has left sanctions as the only option in the eyes of many policymakers.

Alas, perfect sanctions are a mirage. Nowhere has the U.S. imposed such perfect sanctions. And nowhere has such economic pressure forced a government to sacrifice objectives viewed as essential. The same holds true for North Korea.



Former U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at their summit in Singapore on June 12, 2018 | Image: Kevin Lim/THE STRAITS TIMES

Donald Trump deserves credit for drawing North Korean leader Kim Jong Un into the realm of personal summitry, with Kim also meeting Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Moon Jae-in between 2018 and 2019. Unfortunately, the failure of the [Hanoi summit](#) demonstrated the limits of Trump's all-or-nothing deal-making and Kim's top-only decision-making.

Since then, Kim has withdrawn from international engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic played an important role in this shift, but domestic decisions over the past two years suggest a regime re-embracing "juche" self-reliance. The regime is [backtracking](#) on [economic reform](#) and [cracking down](#) on foreign [cultural influences](#). The [outflow of diplomats](#) and aid workers due to COVID-19 restrictions in North Korea is also pushing Pyongyang toward greater isolationism.

The Biden administration, despite repeated attempts to negotiate "[without preconditions](#)," has not coaxed the Kim regime out of its hole. Although the reestablishment of the inter-Korean hotline raised hopes of greater contact, Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, quickly [dampened expectations](#).

As is increasingly understood in [Washington circles](#), the North will never agree to full denuclearization. For some, this leaves sanctions as the [last great hope](#) to make Kim pay for his intransigence. Of course, North Korea has faced sanctions for decades, so the call is really for even tougher economic penalties.

However, enforcement remains uneven. Some [policymakers](#) thus contend that watertight enforcement of the existing sanctions regime would be enough to compel Kim to yield.

Nah Liang Tuang, for instance, [argues on NK Pro](#) that "the Kim regime will not move on its nuclear weapons program unless its economic security or regime survival is at stake ... Since such sanctions amount to an embargo on most of the DPRK's official economy, this will make the opportunity cost, or the cost in terms of alternative spending forgone, exorbitantly high for any expansion or even maintenance of Kim's nuclear weapons."

Yet the Trump administration was the ultimate practitioner of "maximum pressure" through sanctions to achieve American foreign policy objectives, and the policy failed in every case. Communists still rule Cuba, Nicolas Maduro's leftwing apparatchiks still control Venezuela, Bashar al-Assad is still president of Syria, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei still rejects Washington's demands for submission and Kim Jong Un still refuses to deliver his nukes.



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un meets with Salvador Antonio Valdes Mesa of Cuba in July 2016 | Image: KCNA

## DIMINISHING RETURNS

Even greater isolation for North Korea would not likely change Kim's calculus. The North Korean people's welfare has never been high on the family dynasty's priority list. For instance, mass starvation did not change regime policies in the late 1990s, and even today Pyongyang [routinely refuses](#) to accept non-sanctioned humanitarian aid despite over [half its population](#) being unable to properly feed themselves.

Further, the DPRK essentially sanctioned itself last year, closing its borders to prevent the spread of COVID-19. For a time — with [a shoot to kill order](#) for interlopers — the North's isolation seemed almost complete.

Trade with China, which accounted for some 90% of all North Korean overseas commerce before the pandemic, remains at [anemic levels](#). Consumer prices have [fluctuated wildly](#) as a result, with store shelves often understocked or empty and living conditions declining, even for foreign diplomats, [who lacked access to medicines](#) and other critical products. Ominously, [Kim recently warned](#) of another, “more difficult Arduous March,” the same term applied to the famine in the 1990s.

Of course, Chinese and Russian enthusiasm for enforcing sanctions has [waxed and waned](#), usually tied to relations with the U.S. Those who see sanctions as the solution imagine bringing Moscow and Beijing as well as Pyongyang to heel.

## THE OTHER POWERS

Neither China nor Russia wants a nuclear North Korea — the latter's arsenal ensures its independence even from its supposed “friends” — but they worry less about the issue than the U.S. Moreover, Moscow is [a small player](#) in Korean affairs these days and has no reason to help Washington.

The PRC has special cause to avoid risking a North Korean implosion. Beijing does not want massive refugee flows, potential factional violence and loose nuclear weapons on its border. Nor does it favor the emergence of a unified Korea allied with America hosting U.S. troops along the Yalu River. And like Russia, Beijing is in no mood to do Washington any favors.

The U.S. could sanction China and Russia, but they already face [a range of economic restrictions](#). Launching an all-out economic war with them over North Korean compliance would likely not end well. Asian and European countries, which have much business with both, and especially China, would likely not go along. These nations [are already angry](#) at U.S. sanctions overreach elsewhere; there would be little patience for unilateral action against Beijing and Moscow.

Worse yet, China may drop North Korea sanctions enforcement entirely if the U.S. pushed for watertight compliance with the sanctions regime. Turning North Korea into a major battle with the PRC would move the relationship [from bad to worse](#) and make other issues harder to resolve. Overall, America would find it much more difficult to [find a successful strategy against China](#).

Sanctions are the ultimate chimera. How to denuclearize North Korea? War is too dangerous and diplomacy has failed, so sanctions are a comfortable fallback for many. Sanctions “truthers” claim that, never before fully applied, they just need to be comprehensive and effective to pull out a win. If only there was such an easy answer.

*Edited by Arius Derr*

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