

New Sanctions on North Korea: An Act of War by Any Measure

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International law prohibits the use of food as a weapon. However, the new sanctions declared by the United States drastically inhibit the ability of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to export coal and other commodities on the international market. The new sanctions are part of long history of the United States attacking North Korea's economy and harming its ability to provide food for the population.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, US leaders have continuously inhibited the ability of the DPRK to maintain its agriculture system while simultaneously accusing the country's leaders of "starving their own people."

Struggling for Agricultural Self-Reliance

The Korean Peninsula has been divided since 1945. The flat lands that can be used for growing food are mainly in the southern part of the country, where tens of thousands of US troops prop up the Republic of Korea.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has control of the mountainous regions. Socialism has taken hold in the hills and valleys where Kim Il Sung (whose name means 'becomes the sun') fought the Japanese occupiers for decades as a beloved folk hero. Kim Il Sung came to lead the Korean Worker Party which calls for Peaceful Re-Unification of the Korean Peninsula, and has established a centrally planned, Soviet-style economy.

While the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has very little arable land, it has plenty of mineral resources. The overwhelming majority of the coal deposits on the Korean Peninsula can be found in the northern regions.

In 1953, when an armistice ended the fighting in the Korean War, one of the greatest challenges facing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was its lack of arable land. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the DPRK constructed a vast coal mining and steel manufacturing apparatus. The DPRK exported coal to other socialist countries in exchange, not just for food, but for the resources to advance its own domestic agricultural system.

Though the DPRK could import food from the COMECON bloc of countries led by socialist governments, this was still a weakness. Kim Il Sung and the Korean Workers Party emphasized "Juche," or "self-reliance" and pushed the country to carry out the very difficult task of ending reliance on food imports. The stated goal was "food independence." The DPRK began constructing wheat fields on the sides of mountains, making huge efforts to

grow food in mountainous regions and ending the reliance on imported food.

According to the US Central Intelligence Agency, the DPRK achieved food and energy self-sufficiency by the [1970s](#). David Barkin, a researcher for the Institute for Food and Development Policy, visited the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1986 and was amazed at what he saw. He published a short booklet on the DPRK's agricultural policies, and urged the United Nations to help Latin American countries where food production remained sub-par to adopt an agricultural system similar to what was done in the [DPRK](#).

Though the DPRK became food self-sufficient in the 1970s, the agriculture in North Korea depended on one specific import. In order for the highly complex food system to work, it needed lots of petroleum.

The DPRK imported oil from the Soviet Union, and used it to power its tractors as they climbed through rocky areas, plowing artificially constructed fields. Soviet oil enabled the DPRK to transport food to more remote parts of the country which were far from any arable land.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, along with the various socialist governments of Eastern Europe, the international oil markets were dramatically altered. The DPRK could no longer purchase oil from the Soviet Union. With COMECON no longer in existence, OPEC was dominated by US and British aligned governments, and mandated that the purchasing of oil only be done with US dollars. The DPRK was also unable to continue exporting coal and other products like it once had.

The highly efficient, but oil-dependent agricultural system of the DPRK then came to a grinding halt. The country experienced a horrific food crisis as US sanctions prevented the DPRK from acquiring the US dollars needed to buy petroleum on the international market, and use it to grow food.

While US officials continue to talk of the DPRK "starving its own people" they fail to mention that the food crisis of the 1990s was imposed on the country by economic sanctions and the inability to buy oil. It's not Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il who starved the Korean people in the early 1990s. The food crisis was created by the policies imposed on the country.

This period is known as the "Arduous March" by Koreans because it was so difficult for the people. The World Food Program, various religious groups, and other charities helped to relieve those who were starving to death. People from the southern part of the Korean peninsula participated in providing humanitarian assistance to their northern countryfolk, and were imprisoned for their efforts under the autocratic National Security Laws of the Republic of Korea. South Korea's National Security Laws have been widely condemned as inconsistent with international standards of human rights and civil liberties.



Economic Warfare Against the Korean People

As a starvation swept the northern part of the Korean Peninsula, the administration of former US President Bill Clinton reached an agreement with the DPRK which allowed the country to receive some oil imports in exchange for not developing nuclear weapons. The Clinton administration also agreed to assist the DPRK in developing peaceful nuclear energy, as long as arms inspectors were allowed to monitor the sites and ensure that they were not working to develop nuclear weapons.

Following Sept. 11th, 2001, the administration of former US President George W. Bush described the DPRK as part of the “Axis of Evil.” The oil shipments were terminated. At this point, the DPRK withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and began actively developing nuclear weapons—a choice that seems quite logical based on the betrayal of the previous agreement.

Since that time, the DPRK’s agricultural system seems to gradually be recovering and adapting. Political shifts on the global stage have enabled the DPRK to import oil outside of the official OPEC market. Food is also being imported. In 2013, Tom Morrison, an agronomist with the World Food Program, predicted that the DPRK will achieve food self-sufficiency at some point in the near [future](#). The DPRK has experienced substantial economic growth in the last few years, with a boom in housing construction and talk of joint ventures with foreign corporations.

The announcement by US officials of new sanctions on the DPRK, crippling its ability to export coal, was described as a “declaration of war” by North Korean leaders. This is not some wild, extreme claim or accusation.

The DPRK is trying to repair its economy from the disaster of the 1990s. Preventing the DPRK from selling coal on the international markets is, in essence, taking food from the mouths of Korean people. This is an act of economic warfare, and the Korean people are greatly outraged by it.

US leaders are economically strangling the DPRK, and say they are doing it because of concerns about “human rights.” At the same time US oil companies continue to do business with the most blatantly autocratic and repressive dictatorships on earth in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. The US sells weapons and props up the economies of brutal absolute monarchies where even basic notions of human rights do not exist, while continuing to threaten the DPRK based on allegations about labor camps.

According to even its harshest critics, the government in the northern part of the Korean

Peninsula has a constitution and voting, while providing universal housing to the population. These facts alone put the DPRK miles ahead of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates in terms of human rights.

The blatant hypocrisy of US leaders, who sabotage the DPRK's economy and then tell the world that Kim Jong-Un is "starving his own people" is astonishing. There is no reason that the DPRK should not be able to sell its products on the world market like any other country. The harsh response of the DPRK to the new sanctions should not be shocking to anyone.

Caleb Maupin is a political analyst and activist based in New York. He studied political science at Baldwin-Wallace College and was inspired and involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement, especially for the online magazine "[New Eastern Outlook](#)".

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