

Trump's War on the North Korean People

By [Gregory Elich](#)

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Amid renewed talk by the Trump administration of a military option against North Korea, one salient fact goes unnoticed. The United States is already at war with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK – the formal name for North Korea). It is doing so through non-military means, with the aim of inducing economic collapse. In a sense, the policy is a continuation of the Obama administration's 'strategic patience' on steroids, in that it couples a refusal to engage in diplomacy with the piling on of sanctions that constitute collective punishment of the entire North Korean population.

We are told that UN Security Council resolution 2375, passed on September 11, was “watered down” so as to obtain Chinese and Russian agreement. In relative terms, this is true, in that the original draft as submitted by the United States called for extreme measures such as a total oil embargo. However, Western media give the impression that the resolution as passed is mild or mainly symbolic. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The resolution, in tandem with previous sanction votes and in particular resolution 2371 from August 5, is aimed squarely at inflicting economic misery. Among other things, the August sanctions prohibit North Korea from exporting coal, iron, iron ore, lead, lead ore, and seafood, all key commodities in the nation's international trade. The resolution also banned countries from opening new or expanding existing joint ventures with the DPRK. [1]

September's resolution further constrains North Korea's ability to engage in regular international trade by barring the export of textiles. It is estimated that together, the sanctions eliminate 90 percent of the DPRK's export earnings. [2] Foreign exchange is essential for the smooth operation of any modern economy, and U.S. officials hope that by blocking North Korea's ability to earn sufficient foreign exchange, the resolutions will deal a crippling blow to the economy. For North Korea's estimated 100,000 to 200,000 textile workers the impact will be immediate, plunging most of them into unemployment.

“If the goal of the sanctions is to create difficulties for ordinary workers and their ability to make a livelihood, then a ban on textiles will work,” specialist Paul Tija wryly notes. [3]

With around eighty percent of its land comprising mountainous terrain, North Korea has a limited amount of arable land, and the nation typically fills its food gap through imports. Sharply reduced rainfall during the April-June planting season this year reduced the amount of water available for irrigation and hampered sowing activities. Satellite monitoring indicates that crop yields are likely to fall well below the norm. [4] To make up for the

shortfall, the DPRK has significantly boosted imports. [5] How much longer it can continue to do so remains to be seen, in the face of dwindling reserves of foreign exchange. In effect, by blocking North Korea's ability to engage in international trade, the United States has succeeded in weaponizing food by denying North Korea the means of providing an adequate supply to its people.

The September resolution also adversely impacts the livelihoods of North Korea's overseas workers, who will not be allowed to renew their contracts once they expire. They can only look forward to being forced from their jobs and expelled from their homes. [6]

International partnership is discouraged, as the resolution bans "the opening, maintenance, and operation of all joint ventures or cooperative entities, new and existing," which in effect permanently kills off any prospect of the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex. With only two exceptions, all current operations are ordered to shut down within four months. [7]

A cap is imposed on the amount of oil North Korea is allowed to import, amounting to about a thirty percent reduction from current levels, along with a total ban on the import of natural gas and condensates. [8] Many factories and manufacturing plants could be forced to close down when they can no longer operate machinery. For the average person, hardship lies ahead as winter approaches, when many homes and offices will no longer be able to be heated.

What has any of this to do with North Korea's nuclear program? Nothing. The sanctions are an expression of pure malevolence. Vengeance is hitting every citizen of North Korea to further the U.S. goal of geopolitical domination of the Asia-Pacific.

Like North Korea, India, Pakistan, and Israel are non-signatories to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and have nuclear and missile arsenals. India and Pakistan launched ICBMs earlier in the year. North Korea is singled out for punishment, while the others receive U.S. aid. There is no principle at stake here. For that matter, there is something unseemly in the United States, with over one thousand nuclear tests, denouncing North Korea for its six. The U.S., having launched four ICBMs this year, condemns the DPRK for launching half that many. Is it not absurd that the United States, with its long record in recent years of bombing, invading, threatening, and overthrowing other nations, accuses North Korea, which has been at peace for several decades, of being an international threat?

North Korea observed the fate of Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya, and concluded that only a nuclear deterrent could stop the United States from attacking. It is the "threat" of North Korea being able to defend itself that has aroused U.S. ire on a spectacular scale.

The U.S. war on the North Korean people does not stop with UN sanctions. In a recent hearing, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Ed Royce called for Chinese banks that do ordinary business with North Korea to be targeted:

"We can designate Chinese banks and companies unilaterally, giving them a choice between doing business with North Korea or the United States...It's not just China. We should go after banks and companies in other countries that do business with North Korea in the same way...We should press countries to end all trade with North Korea." [9]

At the same hearing, the Treasury Assistant Secretary Marshall Billingslea mentioned that

his department had worked with the Justice Department to blacklist Russia's Independent Petroleum Company in June, along with associated individuals and companies, for having shipped oil to North Korea. Despite the fact that there was no UN resolution at that time which forbade such trade, the U.S. seized nearly \$7 million belonging to the company and its partners. [10]

Acting Assistant Secretary of State Susan Thornton was, if anything, more aggressive in her rhetoric than her colleagues, announcing that

“we continue to call for all countries to cut trade ties with Pyongyang to increase North Korea's financial isolation and choke off revenue sources.”

She cautioned China and Russia that they must acquiesce to U.S. demands, warning them that if they “do not act, we will use the tools we have at our disposal. Just last month we rolled out new sanctions targeting Russian and Chinese individuals and entities supporting the DPRK.” [11]

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin had threats to deliver, as well, warning China that if its actions against North Korea fail to live up to U.S. expectations,

“we will put additional sanctions on them and prevent them from accessing the U.S. and international dollar system.” [12]

Since all international financial transactions process through the U.S. banking system, this threat is tantamount to shutting down Beijing's ability to conduct trade with any nation. It was a rather extravagant threat, and undoubtedly a difficult one to pull off, but one which the Trump administration is just reckless enough to consider undertaking.

There is nothing illegal or forbidden in a nation trading with North Korea in non-prohibited commodities. Yet, a total trade blockade is what Washington is after. U.S. officials are preparing sanctions against foreign banks and companies that do business with North Korea.

“We intend to deny the regime its last remaining sources of revenue, unless and until it reverses course and denuclearizes,” Billingslea darkly warns. “Those who collaborate with them are exposing themselves to enormous jeopardy.” [13]

In essence, Washington is running an international protection racket: give us what we demand, or we will hurt you. This is gangsterism as foreign policy.

China opposed the UN sanctions that the Trump administration presented at the UN Security Council in September. However, according to U.S. and UN officials, the United States managed to extort China's acquiescence by threatening to hit Chinese businesses with secondary sanctions. [14]

Before the August UN vote, similar threats were conveyed to Chinese diplomats at the U.S.-China Comprehensive Economic Dialogue, as U.S. officials indicated that ten businesses and

individuals would be sanctioned if China did not vote in favor of sanctions. [15]

As a shot across the bow, the U.S. sanctioned the Chinese Bank of Dandong back in June, leading to Western firms severing contacts with the institution. [16]

Washington's threats prompted China to implement steps in the financial realm that exceed what is called for by the UN Security Council resolutions. China's largest banks have banned North Korean individuals and entities from opening new accounts, and some firms are not allowing deposits in existing accounts. [17] There is no UN prohibition on North Koreans opening accounts abroad, so the action is regarded as a proactive measure by Chinese banks to avoid becoming the target of U.S. sanctions. [18]

The demands never cease, no matter how much China gives way. U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson recently insisted that China impose a total oil embargo on North Korea. [19] China refused to go along, but it can expect to be subjected to mounting pressure from the U.S. in the weeks ahead.

U.S. officials are fanning out across the globe, seeking to cajole or threaten other nations to join the anti-DPRK crusade. Since most nations stand to lose far more by displeasing the U.S. than in ending a longstanding relationship with the DPRK, the campaign is having an effect.

In April, India banned all trade with North Korea, with the exception of food and medicine. This action failed to satisfy the Trump administration, which sent officials to New Delhi to ask for the curtailing of diplomatic contacts with the DPRK and help in monitoring North Korean economic activities in the region.[20] The Philippines, for its part, responded to U.S. demands by suspending all trade activity with North Korea. [21] Mexico and Peru are among the nations that are expelling North Korean diplomats, on the arbitrary basis of responding to U.S. directives. [22] In addition to announcing that it would reduce North Korea's diplomatic staff, Kuwait also said it would no longer issue visas to North Korean citizens. [23]

Many African nations have warm relations with the DPRK, dating back to the period of the continent's liberation struggles. U.S. officials are focusing particular attention on Africa, and several nations are currently under investigation by the United Nations for their trade with North Korea. [24] The demand to cut relations with North Korea is not an easy sell for Washington, as Africans remember the U.S. for having backed apartheid regimes, while the DPRK had supported African liberation.

"Our world outlook was determined by who was on our side during the most crucial time of our struggle, and North Korea was there for us," says Tuliameni Kalomoh, an official in Namibia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. [25]

This is not the kind of language Washington likes to hear. U.S. economic power is sufficient to ruin any small nation, and with little choice in the matter, Namibia cancelled all contracts with North Korean firms. [26]

Egypt and Uganda are among the nations that have cut ties with the DPRK, and more nations are expected to follow suit, as the United States turns up the heat. Outside of the United Nations, the Trump administration is systematically erecting a total trade blockade against North Korea. Through this means, the U.S. hopes that North Korea will capitulate. That aim is premised on a serious misjudgment of the North Korean character.

The Trump administration claims that UN sanctions and its policy of maximum pressure are intended to bring North Korea to the negotiating table. But it is not the DPRK that needs to be persuaded to talk. President Trump has tweeted,

“Talking is not the answer!”

U.S. State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert laid down a stringent condition for negotiations:

“For us to engage in talks with the DPRK, they would have to denuclearize.” [27]

The demand for North Korea to give the United States everything it wants upfront, without receiving anything in return, as a precondition for talks is such an obvious nonstarter that it has to be regarded as a recipe for avoiding diplomacy.

North Korea contacted the Obama administration on several occasions and requested talks, only to be rebuffed each time and told it needed to denuclearize. This sad disconnect continues under Trump. In May, the DPRK informed the United States that it would stop nuclear testing and missile launches if the U.S. would drop its hostile policy and sanctions, as well as sign a peace treaty ending the Korean War. [28] The U.S. may not have cared for the conditions, but it could have suggested adjustments, had it been so inclined. Certainly, it was an opening that could have led to dialogue.



Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying
(Source: fmprc.gov.cn)

It is not diplomacy that the Trump administration seeks, but to crush North Korea. If the ostensible reason for UN sanctions is to persuade a reluctant party to negotiate, then one can only conclude that the wrong nation is being sanctioned. Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying was scathing in her criticism of American and British leaders:

“They are the loudest when it comes to sanctions, but nowhere to be found when it comes to making efforts to promote peace talks. They want nothing to do with responsibility.” [29]

The months ahead look bleak. Unless China and Russia can find a way to oppose U.S. designs without becoming targets themselves, the North Korean people will stand alone and bear the burden of Trump's malice. It says something for their character that they refuse to be cowed.

Gregory Elich is on the Board of Directors of the Jasenovac Research Institute and the Advisory Board of the Korea Policy Institute. He is a member of the Solidarity Committee for Democracy and Peace in Korea, a columnist for [Voice of the People](#), and one of the co-authors of [Killing Democracy: CIA and Pentagon Operations in the Post-Soviet Period](#), published in the Russian language. He is also a member of the Task Force to Stop THAAD in Korea and Militarism in Asia and the Pacific. His website is <https://gregoryelich.org> Follow him on Twitter at @GregoryElich

Notes

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