

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS AS A DIPLOMATIC TOOL: A STUDY OF NORTH KOREA

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Abstract

The international law which confers autonomy on every sovereign state also stipulates the limits of the autonomy. States are expected to balance their rights of sovereignty with their responsibility to the international community in order to protect common interests and values in an increasingly interconnected world. International organisations which exist to guarantee this objective also make use of sanctions to bring any erring state back to conformity. Over the years, scholars and political leaders have expressed some misgivings about the effectiveness of sanctions as a diplomatic way of correcting a belligerent state. This research, which adopted qualitative research approach, to examine the effectiveness of international sanctions imposed on North Korea to dissuade it from continuing with its nuclear weapon programme, found that the barrage of sanctions imposed on North Korea for almost two decades has not achieved the desired objectives due to a combination of factors, ranging from lack of commitment to the implementation of sanctions by the sanctioning powers to inadequate equipment to ensure monitoring and compliance. The research recommended that for sanctions to be an effective diplomatic tool indeed, strategic approaches which will combine sanctions targeting the country's elite with negotiations should be in place.

Keywords: Diplomatic Tool, International Sanctions, Nuclear Weapons Program, Sanction Effectiveness, Sanction Implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The international community is made up of sovereign states which have supreme power and authority within their respective territorial boundaries. A sovereign state enjoys autonomy from being superintended over by any hierarchically superior or coercive authority in the international society.

That is why it is often said that sovereignty has both internal and external dimensions. The internal dimension implies the ability of a state to exercise control over its population, manage the affairs of the population and regulate their conduct, make and enforce laws as well as administer justice within its borders. The external scope of sovereignty denotes freedom from interference or dictation by other states or international actors. These rights and privileges of sovereign states are clearly enshrined in international law.

However, while sovereignty grants state substantial autonomy, it is important to clarify the fact that this autonomy is not absolute. International law which grants states autonomy also stipulates the limitations of state power, especially with regard to issues such as the violation of human rights, international crimes, and threats to global security.

In an increasingly interconnected world, sovereign states are expected to balance their rights with their responsibility to the international community so as to protect common interests and values. International organisations (which have sovereign states as members), exist to address common challenges and promote cooperation so as to achieve the collective goal of making the global arena a conducive and peaceful place for human habitation. Part of the measures taken by international organisations to achieve the above-stated objective is to impose penalties on any state that engages in the contravention of some important internationally accepted norms so as to deter other states from toeing the same path. The punitive measure imposed on states by international organisations is what is referred to as a sanction.

Hufbauer defines international sanctions as political and economic decisions which are part of diplomatic efforts by multilateral, or regional organisations against states or organisations so as to protect national security interests, guard international law or to defend against threats to international peace and security. Mansourov conceives them as measures imposed on sovereign states to dissuade them from any sort of reckless behavior or steer them back on the right track. Sanctions constitute part of the measures that international organizations or countries can use to mount sufficient pressure on the target of the sanctions so as to make them succumb to the wishes of the influencing organization. International sanctions have also been described as a means by which states employ to conjointly penalize the contravention of some important internationally accepted norms through the legitimate authority of international organizations. Therefore, they are considered as the international community's most powerful diplomatic tool to express dissatisfaction with certain activities when they do not want to employ military tactics. For this reason, sanctions are regarded as veritable tools to help regulate the international system that is anarchical, without any overarching authority above states. Sanctions involve the temporary imposition of economic, trade, financial, diplomatic, military, cultural or other restrictions on the target nation, which are lifted when the motivating security concern ceases to exist or when no new threats have arisen. Under normal circumstances, when international sanctions are imposed on a state, it is expected that the state would abandon the activity that has earned it the ire of the international community and fall in line so that the sanctions can be lifted. But in reality, the international

community has experienced an oscillation between the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of sanctions regimes.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), commonly known as North Korea, has been subjected to a wide variety of international sanctions. The sanctions have been imposed by the United Nations Security Council and individual sovereign states in a bid to dissuade the country from furthering its nuclear weapon programme and human rights crimes. Despite the fact that the application of sanctions has had some impacts on the country's trade, finance, energy industries and citizens welfare, North Korea has continued with frenzied commitment, to pursue its nuclear weapon programme, and it has achieved great success in this as it has succeeded in producing and testing nuclear weapons, against the wish of the Western Powers and the international organisations that exist to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The crux of this research therefore is to examine the persistent challenges and complexities experienced by the international community in imposing and implementing sanctions on North Korea with the goal of evaluating the effectiveness of sanctions as a diplomatic tool to deal with sovereign states.

The Evolution of North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program

The history of the North Korean nuclear weapons program can be traced back to the 1950s when the country began exploring nuclear technology with the assistance of the Soviet Union. On March 26 and September 7, 1956, the Soviet Union and North Korea signed two agreements that outlined the terms of their collaboration in nuclear research projects.¹ These agreements laid the foundation for cooperation between the two nations in the field of nuclear research. Part of the agreement included the opportunity for North Korean scientists to receive formal training in nuclear physics at the Soviet Dubna Nuclear Research Complex.² Shortly afterward, the North Korean government established Nuclear Physics Departments at Kim Il-sung National University and Kim Ch'aek Industrial College, both located in North Korea.³ These institutions were designed to provide academic training for the majority of North Korea's nuclear scholars and technicians. The faculty members of these departments engaged in fundamental nuclear research and were responsible for monitoring international developments in the field of nuclear physics. In 1959, the Soviet Union and North Korea signed another pact on the peaceful utilization of nuclear energy.⁴ as part of this agreement, a compact research-type reactor, along with other sophisticated nuclear equipment, was transferred to North Korea. In addition, during the late 1950s, the North Korean government dispatched some of its nuclear scientists to participate in nuclear training programs held at an unspecified nuclear-related institute in China.⁵

In the early 1960s, the first generation of North Korean scientists who had been trained at the Soviet Dubna Nuclear Research Institute completed their training and returned to North Korea.⁶ in the early part of the 1960s, the North Korean government made the decision to establish its own domestic nuclear training school. This led to the inception of the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Complex, which was overseen by the North Korean

Academy of Sciences and equipped with an IRT-2000 research reactor that became operational in 1965.⁷

North Korea's nuclear program soon became the subject of intense international diplomacy, as it contravened international law that prohibits any state—other than the five recognized nuclear-weapon states (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the USA)—from possessing or transferring nuclear weapons. The increasing political and economic isolation of North Korea made it difficult for the country to procure the nuclear resources necessary to sustain domestic research and development. After years of resisting pressure from the international community to sign the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) agreement, North Korea finally consented in 1992 to a nuclear safeguard's agreement with the IAEA.⁸ By this time, the country's leadership had announced its intention to abandon the military aspect of its nuclear program. However, when the first international inspection team arrived at its nuclear facilities in May 1993, it discovered that North Korea was not in compliance with its Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations.⁹ The ensuing atmosphere of suspicion, disagreement, confrontation, and mutual accusations between North Korea and the IAEA ultimately led North Korea to threaten withdrawal from the NPT in March 1993.¹⁰

In June 1994, former President of the United States, Jimmy Carter, traveled to North Korea on a historic visit during which he negotiated directly with Kim Il-sung. As a result of this negotiation, North Korea committed to dismantling the military capabilities of its nuclear program and redirecting its focus toward civilian applications. On November 1, 1994, North Korea pledged to adhere to IAEA standards and inspections, and eventually to decommission its graphite-moderated reactors.¹¹

On January 10, 2003, North Korea formally withdrew from the NPT, citing the perceived hostile and aggressive posture of the United States.¹² Allegedly, U.S. actions—including identifying North Korea as a target for a preemptive nuclear strike, threatening the country with blockades and military punishment, and branding it as part of the “axis of evil”—resulted in deep mistrust of the U.S. by North Korea and ultimately led to its withdrawal from the NPT. Meanwhile, U.S. intelligence agencies maintained that North Korea had never completely abandoned its nuclear weapons program, despite international perceptions to the contrary.¹³ Prior to North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT in 2003, the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had raised concerns in 2002, alleging that North Korea possessed at least one nuclear weapon and had the capacity to produce more.¹⁴ In 2005, North Korea officially announced for the first time that it possessed nuclear weapons. On October 9, 2006, the North Korean Foreign Minister issued a statement confirming that the country had successfully conducted its first nuclear test.¹⁵

The Objective of North Korea's Nuclear Program

There are various perspectives on why North Korea pursues nuclear weapons and how this aligns with the country's broader security strategies. The first perspective is based on the belief that North Korea is an isolated state. Accordingly, its quest to become a nuclear-weapon state stems from a perceived vulnerability, arising from being surrounded by

unreliable allies or adversaries' intent on dismantling the regime. North Korea is particularly wary of potential military threats from the United States and South Korea. The presence of U.S. military bases in the region, the regular joint military exercises conducted by the United States and South Korea, and the historical hostility between the U.S. and North Korea—dating back to the Cold War and post-Korean War period—are perceived by North Korean leadership as existential threats. North Korea believes that attaining nuclear capability is the only reliable means to deter potential external aggression and ensure regime survival. According to the country's current leader, Kim Jong-un, nuclear weapons are regarded as "a military asset, an insurance policy, and a vast source of prestige all in one."¹⁶ Having observed the overthrow of governments in Ukraine, Iraq, and Libya after they relinquished their nuclear weapons or programs, the North Korean leadership is determined to avoid making the same mistake.¹⁷

The second viewpoint portrays North Korea as a hyper-realist state, where the leadership believes that military power—rather than alliances or cooperation—is the only true guarantee of national security.¹⁸ Proponents of this view argue that the possession of nuclear weapons not only deters foreign military intervention but also enables North Korea to pursue its national interests while defying international norms with minimal consequences. Moreover, nuclear armament is believed to foster a "rally around the flag" effect, consolidating internal unity and popular support for the regime.

The third perspective describes North Korea as a revisionist state—defined as one that seeks to challenge or change established norms, principles, agreements, or power dynamics in the international system to advance its own interests or ideology.¹⁹ Advocates of this view argue that North Korea has developed nuclear weapons primarily for offensive purposes. They suggest that North Korea's ultimate goal is to use its nuclear arsenal to undermine the United States–South Korea alliance, take control of the southern half of the Korean Peninsula, and achieve reunification on its own terms.

International Sanctions Imposed on North Korea

Sanctions Imposed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)

According to Chapter VII, Article 41 of the United Nations Charter, "The Security Council may decide any measures, not involving the use of armed force, to give effect to its decisions, and it may call upon Members of the United Nations to apply such measures. These may include complete or partial interruption of economic relations and of rail, sea, air, postal, telegraphic, radio, and other means of communication, and the severance of diplomatic relations."²⁰

In 2006, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed a series of sanction resolutions against North Korea in response to its nuclear and missile programs. These resolutions, which condemned North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile activities, were unanimously adopted by the Security Council. One such resolution was **UN Security Council Resolution 1718**, which denounced North Korea's initial nuclear test and imposed sanctions that restricted the provision of heavy armaments, missile technology

and components, and certain luxury items to the country. The resolution also established a committee comprising all fifteen members of the Security Council to monitor, evaluate, and modify the imposed sanctions and address any violations.²¹ This committee was mandated to issue a progress report on the implementation of the sanctions every 90 days.

Following North Korea's second nuclear test on June 12, 2009, the UNSC adopted **Resolution 1874**, which intensified international sanctions against the country. These measures included an arms embargo, financial sanctions, authorization for member states to inspect and seize cargo suspected of carrying ballistic materials, expanded individual asset freezes, travel restrictions, and a prohibition on the export of luxury goods to North Korea. The resolution also mandated the creation of a seven-member **Panel of Experts (PoE)** to assist the sanctions committee in enforcing the resolution and overseeing its implementation.²² Although the Panel of Experts was initially granted a one-year mandate, it was later instructed to provide regular reports to the sanctions committee on potential violations and suggestions for improving enforcement.

On December 12, 2012, North Korea conducted a satellite launch that violated **Resolutions 1718 (2006)** and **1874 (2009)**, both of which prohibited advancements in technology that could support its ballistic missile programs. In response, the UNSC adopted **Resolution 2087** on January 22, 2013, with full support from all member states. Resolution 2087 did not introduce any new monitoring mechanisms; rather, it reinforced the sanctions already imposed under Resolution 1874.²³

Following North Korea's third nuclear test in February 2013, the UNSC adopted **Resolution 2094** in March 2013, which imposed more severe sanctions. In addition to tightening existing sanctions, it introduced measures to restrict the financial activities of North Korea's diplomatic missions.²⁴ Moreover, the resolution expanded the panel responsible for monitoring implementation from seven to eight members.

North Korea's fourth nuclear test and a submarine-launched missile test in 2015 prompted further UNSC action in the form of **Resolution 2270**, adopted in 2016. In response to the country's fifth nuclear test, **Resolution 2321** was passed in 2017. This resolution prohibited the export of minerals, helicopters, and other goods to North Korea.²⁵

In July 2017, North Korea conducted tests of two intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). This action led to the adoption of **Resolution 2371** in August 2017. The resolution-imposed sanctions that sought to reduce North Korea's foreign earnings by up to \$1 billion annually, although some analysts expressed skepticism about the feasibility of this claim.²⁶ Later, in response to North Korea's sixth and most powerful nuclear test, **Resolution 2375** was adopted in September 2017. This resolution included new directives for member states to undertake maritime interdictions—without using force—if there were credible grounds to suspect a vessel was transporting illicit goods to North Korea. If a ship refused inspection, the flag state was required to direct it to a port for examination.²⁷

Additional sanctions were imposed in December 2017 through **Resolution 2397**, which introduced new restrictions on exports of oil, metals, agricultural products, and labor to North Korea.²⁸ On May 26, 2022, however, a U.S.-sponsored resolution aimed at implementing further sanctions—including embargoes on tobacco and oil imports—was **vetoed by China and Russia**.²⁹ This proposed resolution would have mandated member states to seize and confiscate vessels transporting banned goods such as oil and coal to North Korea.

Most of the UNSC resolutions did not merely impose sanctions; they also authorized member states to intercept and inspect North Korean cargo within their jurisdictions and to seize and dispose of illicit shipments. Additionally, the resolutions urged North Korea to return to the **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)**, which it signed in 1985 but withdrew from in 2003. The Council also consistently encouraged North Korea to participate in the **Six-Party Talks**, a negotiation framework involving South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States.³⁰

Sanctions Imposed by the United States of America

Between 1988 and 2007, the United States classified North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism, a designation that subjected the country to additional sanctions. However, in 2008, the administration of President George W. Bush removed North Korea from the list following progress in denuclearization talks between the two countries.³¹ In 2017, President Donald Trump reinstated this classification in response to the assassination of Kim Jong-nam (the half-brother of Kim Jong-un) in Malaysia and the death of Otto Warmbier, an American student who had been detained in North Korea.³²

Also in 2017, the **Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)** was enacted.³³ The legislation aimed to impose additional sanctions on North Korea, Iran, and Russia. Under CAATSA, specific types of U.S. assistance were prohibited for any foreign governments that provided support to North Korea.³⁴ That same year, President Trump authorized the U.S. Treasury Department to block any foreign individual or entity facilitating trade with North Korea from accessing the U.S. financial system.³⁵ This measure formed part of the administration's broader "maximum pressure" campaign.

In 2022, President Joe Biden imposed sanctions on eight North Korean and Russian entities due to their involvement in North Korea's missile program.³⁶ Nevertheless, the Biden administration expressed a willingness to ease certain sanctions in exchange for measurable progress by North Korea toward denuclearization.³⁷

Sanctions Imposed by South Korea

South Korea began imposing unilateral sanctions on North Korea in 2010. Its most recent sanctions were implemented in 2017 and targeted twenty organizations and thirty individuals involved in North Korea's missile program. These measures included trade boycotts, as well as financial and travel restrictions on individuals associated with the North Korean regime.³⁸

Sanctions Imposed by Japan

The first sanctions imposed on North Korea by the Japanese government were enacted in September 2006, following North Korea's first nuclear test. Fifteen groups and one individual linked to North Korea's nuclear weapons program were specifically targeted. The sanctions effectively banned financial transfers to any group or organization associated with the program. At the time, Japan's Finance Minister, Sadakazu Tanigaki, stated that all Japanese financial institutions would be monitored to ensure compliance. Although Japan had no formal diplomatic relations with North Korea, there were limited trading activities between the two countries.³⁹ Additionally, many ethnic Koreans residing in Japan were sending hundreds of millions of dollars to North Korea, providing a vital source of economic support to the regime.

In 2016, Japan introduced a new set of sanctions against North Korea, which were subsequently extended in 2017, 2019, and 2021. These sanctions included the freezing of specific North Korean assets, a ban on bilateral trade, restrictions on the entry of North Korean citizens and vessels into Japanese territory, and a prohibition on remittances exceeding \$880. Japan has actively monitored compliance with these sanctions by tracking North Korean cargo transfers in regional waters. In March 2022, Japan responded once again—this time to a North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile launch—by imposing additional sanctions. These measures included asset freezes on more individuals and organizations connected to North Korea's weapons of mass destruction programs. Between 2006 and 2022, the Japanese government sanctioned approximately 129 entities and 120 individuals associated with North Korea's nuclear program.⁴⁰

Sanctions Imposed by Australia

Australia, like Japan, began imposing sanctions on North Korea in 2006. These sanctions included specific measures targeting certain North Korean individuals and entities.⁴¹ They involved the prevention of designated North Korean individuals from traveling to Australia and the blocking of eighteen ships linked to North Korea from entering Australian ports and waterways. The sanctions also placed restrictions on commercial transactions with industries connected to North Korea. In addition, Australia imposed limitations on business activities with **Air Koryo**, North Korea's national airline. In 2022, Australia further strengthened its sanctions by adding three more entities to the sanctions list.⁴²

Sanctions Imposed by the European Union

The European Union has imposed several sanctions on North Korea in response to its continued development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. These sanctions include a ban on the import and export of goods and technologies—particularly weapons and luxury items such as gold, diamonds, and other precious metals—between EU member states and North Korea.⁴³ They also restrict North Korean nationals from accessing certain types of training and impose limitations on remittances sent to North Korea.⁴⁴ Additionally, the EU has frozen the assets of individuals and entities involved in

North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and restricted financial transactions with them.⁴⁵

Travel bans have also been imposed on individuals associated with North Korea's weapons programs, including those responsible for human rights violations and other breaches of international law.⁴⁶ As part of its broader diplomatic measures, the EU downgraded its relations with North Korea by suspending certain diplomatic activities in the country.⁴⁷

Further sanctions imposed by the EU include the prohibition of financial transactions with North Korean banks and their affiliates or branches; the closure of representative offices, branches, and subsidiaries of such banks within EU territory; and the termination of joint ventures and investments in EU-based banks by North Korean financial institutions.⁴⁸ The EU has also enforced restrictions on the issuance and trade of specific bonds, imposed limitations over flights and airport access for certain aircraft, and restricted port access for designated North Korean vessels.⁴⁹

These measures aim to exert pressure on the North Korean regime to abandon its nuclear weapons program and to comply with international law. In 2022, the EU expanded its sanctions by freezing the assets of an additional twelve individuals and entities.⁵⁰

Objectives of the Sanctions Against North Korea

The aims and objectives of the various sanctions imposed on North Korea are outlined below:

- I. First and foremost, the primary objective of the sanctions against North Korea since 2006 has been to deter the country from continuing its nuclear and missile programs. The sanctions were designed to create economic and diplomatic pressure, making it more costly for North Korea to pursue these programs. For example, UNSC Resolution 2270 of 2016 expressed "grave concern" about North Korea's nuclear and missile activities and called on the country to halt any further nuclear tests or ballistic missile launches.⁵¹
- II. Second, the sanctions aimed to stall the proliferation of nuclear weapons by North Korea. The international community feared that North Korea might share its nuclear technology or materials with other states or non-state actors, including terrorist organizations. UNSC Resolution 2321 of 2016 emphasized this concern by stressing "the importance of preventing proliferation of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, and their means of delivery."⁵²
- III. Furthermore, the sanctions sought to promote regional and international security by preventing North Korea from developing nuclear weapons and missiles that could threaten its neighbors and beyond. For instance, UNSC Resolution 2321 of 2016 noted that North Korea's nuclear and missile activities "seriously undermine regional and international peace and security."⁵³
- IV. In addition, the sanctions aimed to encourage North Korea to comply with international law, including UNSC resolutions prohibiting the development of

nuclear weapons and missiles. In UNSC Resolution 2270 of 2016, the Council mandated North Korea to “abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs in a complete, verifiable, and irreversible manner in compliance with the various extant international law.”⁵⁴

- V. Moreover, the sanctions were intended to motivate North Korea to engage in negotiations and diplomatic efforts to address the nuclear issue.

The objectives outlined above clearly demonstrate that the international community’s main goal was to apply economic and diplomatic pressure to compel North Korea to come to the negotiating table to discuss denuclearization and to abide by international law. Indeed, UNSC Resolution 2270 (2016) emphasized “the importance of a peaceful, diplomatic and political solution” and urged North Korea to “resume credible and meaningful denuclearization talks with the aim of promoting peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula and beyond.”⁵⁵

The Impact of International Sanctions on North Korea

The humanitarian consequences of international sanctions on North Korea are substantial. Both the country’s economy and its people are suffering under the severe impact of these sanctions. North Korea continues to face significant challenges in meeting the basic needs of its citizens, including access to food, healthcare, and other essential services. In 2007, approximately 40 North Korean embassies worldwide appealed to foreign governments for food aid to help feed millions of people who were nearing starvation.⁵⁶ China, which had previously responded positively to North Korea’s requests for food assistance, was also experiencing food shortages due to drought conditions.⁵⁷ The humanitarian situation worsened with the outbreak of COVID-19, during which trade between China and North Korea dropped by 90% compared to pre-pandemic levels.⁵⁸ Additionally, some key international food donors made humanitarian aid contingent upon North Korea’s willingness to address its nuclear program and other security concerns.⁵⁹

When humanitarian supplies do reach North Korea, they are often delayed by complicated customs regulations and bureaucratic procedures. A 2019 report released by the United Nations Security Council revealed that humanitarian aid shipments could take up to ten months to be processed, and in some cases, aid was blocked entirely.⁶⁰ This occurs in a country where half of the population suffers from malnutrition and children frequently experience stunted growth. This scenario reinforces the widely held view that ordinary families—rather than the elite, who are the intended targets—are the hardest hit by sanctions. For example, export restrictions on the fishing, textile, and coal industries, as well as bans preventing North Korean citizens from working abroad, predominantly affect the general populace.⁶¹

Furthermore, sanctions have limited North Korea’s ability to engage in international trade and access the facilities of international financial institutions. This has hindered the country’s trade relationships and its capacity to generate revenue, compromising its ability to invest in critical sectors such as infrastructure and technology.⁶² Consequently, international sanctions have deepened North Korea’s diplomatic isolation alongside its

economic seclusion. However, due to the secretive nature of the regime, it remains difficult to precisely determine the full extent of the economic impact of these sanctions.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of International Sanctions Against North Korea's Nuclear Program

The effectiveness of international sanctions against North Korea is a complex and contentious issue that has been widely debated among policymakers, scholars, and analysts. While some argue that sanctions have succeeded in exerting pressure on North Korea to curb its nuclear program and human rights abuses, others contend that sanctions have largely failed to achieve their objectives and have instead produced unintended consequences.⁶³

On one hand, some experts maintain that negotiating with a belligerent leadership such as that of North Korea is a futile effort and thus advocate for stronger sanctions. They point to numerous bilateral and multilateral negotiations on denuclearization since the 1990s, which North Korea's leadership has consistently disregarded. For example, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's 2000 visit to Pyongyang, which offered sanction relief and humanitarian aid in exchange for limiting North Korea's ballistic missile program, ultimately yielded no compliance.⁶⁴ Likewise, Kim Jong-un's failure to fulfill commitments made to President Donald Trump after their historic 2018 summit, despite a series of U.S. concessions, is cited by sanction proponents as evidence that negotiating with a hardliner like Kim does not change his ideology or behavior.⁶⁵

Furthermore, advocates argue that sanctions have been effective in shaping North Korea's behavior by imposing political and economic costs. By restricting North Korea's access to finance, trade, and energy, sanctions have forced the regime to prioritize its limited resources.⁶⁶ Proponents also contend that sanctions have contributed to the country's international isolation and undermined its legitimacy, frustrating its attempts to engage economically with other nations.⁶⁷ Moreover, sanctions have been credited with bringing North Korea to the negotiating table and opening diplomatic opportunities. Supporters of sanctions believe that with sustained and resilient efforts, sanctions can eventually yield results, citing the protracted sanctions against apartheid-era South Africa as an example of eventual success, despite taking nearly three decades.⁶⁸

However, critics argue that international sanctions against North Korea have largely failed to achieve their intended objectives. Since 2006, despite the United Nations Security Council, the United States, and other countries imposing successive rounds of sanctions, North Korea has not denuclearized.⁶⁹ Instead, sanctions appear to have emboldened the regime to continue nuclear testing. While sanctions have exacerbated poverty among the general population, who endure economic hardship and squalid living conditions, the leadership remains steadfast in maintaining North Korea's nuclear capabilities. Consequently, critics view sanctions as an illegitimate form of collective punishment that disproportionately harms the most vulnerable groups in society, such as infants, children, the elderly, and the chronically ill.⁷⁰

Looking back, critics note that sanctions and embargoes first imposed on North Korea following the Korean War in the 1950s have been largely ineffective. Decades of sanctions have only hardened the Kim dynasty's belligerence, enhancing its military capabilities and resolve.⁷¹ Four successive U.S. presidents have escalated sanctions to dissuade North Korea from pursuing nuclear weapons, yet the country is now believed to possess dozens of nuclear warheads and long-range missiles capable of striking targets across Asia and the Pacific.⁷² History, they argue, demonstrates that economic sanctions are a limited tool for compelling a belligerent regime to abandon its hardline stance. The rare success story of sanctions in apartheid South Africa is often cited as an exception rather than the norm.⁷³

Critics further emphasize that, as is common in international relations, economic sanctions frequently fail to impact the intended political elites negatively. Instead, ordinary citizens suffer the most, while political and economic elites circumvent sanctions through informal networks and corruption.⁷⁴ Sanctions have arguably strengthened the authoritarian regime by providing a pretext to tighten control over the population and suppress dissent.⁷⁵ Despite the economic, financial, diplomatic, and humanitarian fallout—including soaring inflation, unemployment, declining living standards, and shortages of basic goods—the North Korean government has demonstrated remarkable resilience, frustrating the international community's efforts.⁷⁶ Additionally, sanctions have been instrumental in fueling nationalist sentiment within North Korea, enabling the regime to portray sanctioning states as Western aggressors and rally domestic support. In other words, the leadership views sanctions as a tool to bolster nationalism.

From the foregoing, it is evident that both supporters and critics of sanctions agree that international sanctions against North Korea have not been effective in fully achieving their intended objectives. The next section of this article will examine some of the reasons attributed to the ineffectiveness of sanctions against the country.

Reason for the Ineffectiveness of Sanctions Against North Korea

Several reasons have been cited for the failure of sanctions against North Korea to achieve their intended objectives. One major factor is the continued support provided to North Korea by some of its regional allies, including China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea. It is noteworthy that while all these countries agree with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions against North Korea and have imposed their own unilateral measures, they have been cautious in implementing the most severe sanctions due to concerns about regional stability.

For instance, China and Russia believe that enforcing harsh sanctions could destabilize East Asia and fear the potential consequences of a regime collapse in Pyongyang. Reflecting these concerns, on May 26, 2022, both nations vetoed a U.S.-drafted UNSC resolution that sought to impose additional sanctions on North Korea, including bans on tobacco and oil imports.⁷⁷ Similarly, Japan and South Korea have exercised restraint in sanction implementation because of their geographical proximity and historical ties with North Korea. South Korea, for example, has provided billions of dollars in aid through

international organizations like the World Food Program since the 1990s. Past South Korean presidents have engaged directly with Kim Jong-un and approved aid disbursements, such as medical supplies and vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic, which North Korea ultimately rejected.

At a 2024 UNSC meeting to extend the mandate of the Panel of Experts (PoE), 13 countries voted in favor of renewal, China abstained, and Russia exercised its veto power. Consequently, the PoE ceased operations in 2024. Some observers speculate that Russia's veto was linked to North Korea's role as a significant supplier of war materials to Russia, especially after the renewal of their bilateral relationship in 2022. Other members of the UNSC suggested that Russia's veto was also motivated by ongoing PoE investigations into alleged violations of sanctions by Russia itself. This situation highlights how the enforcement of sanctions ultimately depends on individual states, which may bend or amend rules to serve their own economic and political interests.

This tension between national interests and international responsibility poses a critical challenge. When UNSC members use their veto power to prioritize self-interest over collective action, it undermines efforts to pursue common international goals. As a result, North Korea continues to maintain cordial diplomatic and economic relations, as well as receive assistance from these nations. This lack of cohesion in sanction enforcement is a fundamental obstacle to their effectiveness.

Related to this is North Korea's ability to secure illicit trade routes, some linked to China. In 2021, illegal channels enabled North Korea to import refined petroleum exceeding the UN-imposed quota of 500,000 barrels by 64,301 barrels. While some experts call for stronger sanctions against Chinese entities violating international regulations, others warn that expanding sanctions against Chinese interests could jeopardize U.S.-China relations and undermine cooperation on critical global issues like terrorism and climate change.⁷⁸

Additionally, various countries, business entities, and individuals have been found evading military, trade, and financial restrictions. A 2020 investigation by the Institute for Science and International Security identified approximately 62 entities—including states—that failed to comply with UN measures against North Korea. Some acted deliberately to sabotage sanctions, while others did so inadvertently.⁷⁹

The ineffectiveness of sanctions is also linked to many states' limited capacity to conduct complex investigations, inspect shipments at ports, and enforce sanctions rigorously. There is no unified, effective mechanism for monitoring sanctions or ensuring coordination between governments and relevant agencies worldwide. Consequently, it is difficult to assess sanctions' true impact. This enforcement gap allows entities and individuals—especially in regions like Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia—to engage in black market activities and smuggling that evade customs scrutiny and official oversight. In many cases, sanctions primarily serve as symbolic gestures expressing international disapproval rather than delivering substantive impact.

Furthermore, some experts argue that North Korea's leadership remains undeterred because it views harsher sanctions as existential threats to the regime's survival—threats it is prepared to resist at any cost. This is especially true under Kim Jong-un, who has escalated nuclear and missile tests since assuming power in 2012, conducting more tests than his predecessors. The regime regards its nuclear program as its most valuable bargaining chip in negotiations with the international community, given its isolated socioeconomic and political status. To North Korea's government, pressuring it to abandon its nuclear arsenal is tantamount to stripping it of power and exposing it to manipulation and interference by Western powers.

The country's leadership, grounded in a strong militarist ideology, perceives nuclear advancement as essential to its continued survival as a sovereign state free from external intervention. Moreover, the regime views its nuclear weapons program as necessary for gaining international recognition. Consequently, North Korea regards sanctions as unjust obstacles to its sovereignty and survival. Kim Jong-un himself has described U.S. efforts to impose further sanctions as “gangster-like,” which has only fueled his defiance.

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that the various international sanctions regimes imposed on North Korea have not been effective in achieving their primary objectives. Although sanctions have imposed significant costs on North Korea—contributing to its status as a pariah state—they have ultimately failed to halt or roll back the country's nuclear and missile programs. This failure can be attributed to multiple factors, including North Korea's adeptness at evading sanctions and accessing the global financial system and goods through front companies and shell corporations, the inconsistent commitment of some states to fully enforce sanctions, and the exploitation of loopholes within the international sanctions framework.

Regrettably, the international community continues to rely heavily on sanctions as a primary foreign policy tool to address North Korea's defiant posture. Advocates for genuine dialogue and negotiation argue that historical attempts to use coercive brinkmanship have demonstrated that North Korea thrives under external threats. Rather than yielding to pressure, the regime leverages perceived threats to justify emergency measures and consolidate internal control, portraying the country as besieged. From this perspective, sanctions have not generated sustained, long-term pressure or achieved their intended political and economic goals. Instead, a shift toward economic engagement and diplomatic dialogue may be necessary to incentivize North Korea to reconsider its stance.

It is therefore imperative that the international community adopt a more sophisticated, evidence-based approach in the design, implementation, and evaluation of sanctions. The context in which sanctions are applied, their strategic design, and the precision of their targeting are critical to their success. This research concludes by emphasizing the need for a comprehensive strategy that integrates targeted sanctions against the political elite with robust diplomatic engagement and regional cooperation mechanisms.

Moreover, before imposing new sanctions, existing measures must be rigorously enforced. There is little merit in multiplying sanctions when current ones remain inadequately implemented. To enhance enforcement, international ports should be better equipped, and training provided to port authorities tasked with inspecting vessels suspected of violating sanctions. Only through such a multidimensional and coordinated approach can the international community hope to effectively address the challenges posed by North Korea's nuclear ambitions and contribute to greater regional and global security.

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