

Policy Forum 09-033: Sanctions Will Have No Effect on North Korea

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Sanctions Will Have No Effect on North Korea

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By Andrei Lankov

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I. Introduction

Andrei Lankov, Associate Professor at Kookmin University in Seoul, writes, "There is no alternative to negotiations with Mr Kim's clique. But Pyongyang dictators should be taught that provocations do not pay (or, at least, do not pay handsomely and immediately). This is especially important now,

when Mr Obama's administration has its first encounter with North Korean brinkmanship."

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II. Article by Andrei Lankov

- "Sanctions Will Have No Effect on North Korea"

By Andrei Lankov

The North Korean rocket launch a week ago produced a predictable wave of diplomatic indignation. The United Nations Security Council held an emergency session, where diplomats from the US and its allies pressed for "strong condemnation". There was no shortage of stern warnings coming from capitals worldwide. This diplomatic outburst seems to be a normal reaction. President Barack Obama, condemning the launch, said: "Words must mean something." Indeed. However, the words of condemnation mean nothing.

The US and its allies have almost no leverage when it comes to dealing with North Korea. There is much talk about sanctions, but, to be effective, they must be upheld by all major states, and this is not going to happen. China and Russia, driven by their own agendas, have already made clear that they would not support a tougher approach. These two states have veto power in the Security Council, and are major trade partners of North Korea (slightly more than half of Pyongyang's entire trade is with them).

The ineffectiveness of sanctions has been demonstrated before. In 2006 when Kim Jong-il's regime conducted its first nuclear test, even China was outraged and supported UN sanctions. However, it soon became clear that the sanctions were not working, since not only China, but also the US chose to return to business as usual. As a result from 2006 the North Korean government, despite theoretically being subjected to sanctions, felt more secure domestically and internationally than at any time since the early 1990s.

What else can be done? Military actions are unthinkable. Unilateral economic pressure will not work since neither the US nor its major allies have significant trade with North Korea. Financial sanctions, imposed on the foreign banks serving the regime, would probably deliver a blow, but it is unlikely that this would lead to a serious crisis in Pyongyang.

Indeed, even if an efficient sanctions regime were imposed, its only victims would be common people in North Korea. In the late 1990s, about 5 per cent of the entire population starved to death, but there were no signs of discontent: terrified, isolated and unaware of any alternative to their system, North Korean farmers did not rebel, but died quietly.

This means that diplomatic condemnation will have no consequences, and North Korean dictators understand this. If anything, the excessive noise is harmful: the sharp contrast between bellicose statements and lack of real action will again demonstrate to North Korean leaders that their opponents are powerless.

However, there is something even worse than empty threats, and this is empty threats followed by generous concessions. If history is a guide, this is likely to happen. In 2002-06 the US took a very harsh approach to the North, but everything changed in October 2006 when North Korea conducted a partially successful nuclear test. In merely four months, US policy was dramatically reversed, negotiations were restarted, and aid delivery resumed. Perhaps this change of policy was wise in

itself (isolation would not work anyway), but its timing was bad. It once again confirmed to North Koreans that blackmail works.

The recent launch confirmed they had learnt the lesson. Since the regime was afraid the US was not paying enough attention to it, it was deliberately provocative, in the hope that the US, after a short outburst of militant rhetoric, would rush back to the negotiating table ready to make more concessions. It might be right.

This is not to say that the best way to deal with North Korea is "benevolent neglect". International exchanges are the best way to influence the North Korean people, as experience of the former USSR and east Europe demonstrates. In addition, neglect would be risky. If completely neglected, North Korea would merely raise the stakes, staging even bolder provocations, until it got a desired level of attention from Washington. A second nuclear test is a probability, and if this does not have the intended effect on the US, it might go even further.

There is no alternative to negotiations with Mr Kim's clique. But Pyongyang dictators should be taught that provocations do not pay (or, at least, do not pay handsomely and immediately). This is especially important now, when Mr Obama's administration has its first encounter with North Korean brinkmanship.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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