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The United Nations and North Korea: A Balancing Act between Sanctions and Humanitarian Assistance

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A leadership that defies all pleas for reason stands opposite a population that faces dire humanitarian needs. While the Security Council is desperately attempting to uphold the Non-Proliferation Treaty and trying to circumvent a nuclear arms race in the Asia Pacific by imposing drastic sanctions, six residential UN agencies and several more non-residential UN bodies are providing humanitarian assistance to the impoverished country.

With increasingly provocative and hostile statements from Pyongyang as well as a concerning number of ballistic missile tests in 2017 alone (see Figure 1), stances in the UN Security Council (UNSC) toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) are hardening. In an unprecedented manner, the Security Council voted unanimously to pass resolution 2375 on September 11th 2017, which included some of the most drastic economic sanctions yet and entered into force only four weeks after the last sanctions-implementing resolution was adopted. While power struggles between the Kim Regime and the UNSC are played out in the world's limelight, aid workers in the DPRK have been fighting a battle against deteriorating living conditions for decades; an often overlooked reality. Additionally North Korea is currently facing its worst drought since 2001, leaving entire crops destroyed and putting the country at immediate risk of widespread malnutrition.

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The Security Council unanimously adopts resolution 2375 (2017), condemning in the strongest terms the nuclear test conducted by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) (©United Nations Photo # 718398)

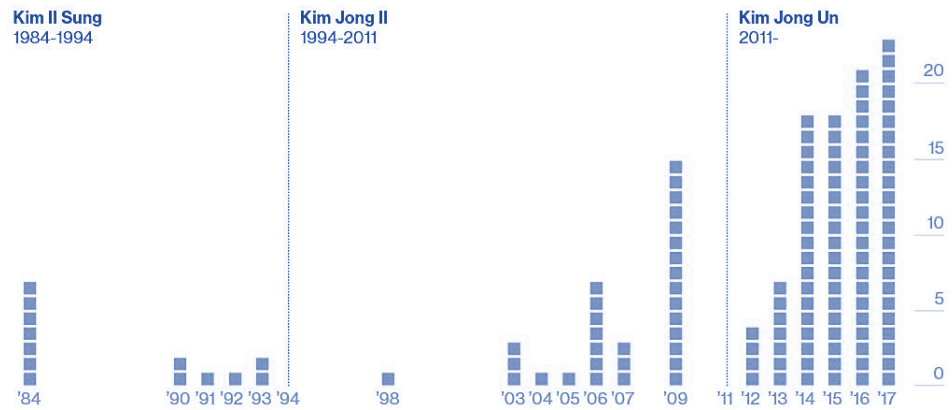
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1. The DPRK conundrum: Continued economic growth despite severe UN sanctions

The United Nations sanctions regime on the DPRK commenced in the fall of 2006. As a consequence of the detonation of a nuclear device that North Korea described as part of their, "regular military drills to strengthen self-defense,"¹ the Security Council imposed its first set of sanctions on the country. Resolution 1718 calls for the immediate end to further nuclear testing and detonations of ballistic missiles. The Council additionally urged the DPRK to, "abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner," and to return to the six-party talks, which had commenced in 2003 when North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Figure 1: Increase in missile launches and nuclear tests conducted by the Kim Regime since 1984



Source: Center for Strategic & International Studies, Bloomberg

Establishment of the DPRK Sanctions Committee and the Panel of Experts

Pursuant to resolution 1718, the UNSC created the DPRK Sanctions Committee whose mandate is to oversee the implementation of the adopted measures. As a result of continued missile launches related to the DPRK's nuclear program, resolution 1874 not only implemented new sanctions but created the Panel of Experts, which assists the Sanctions Committee in its work through expert analysis, particularly in evaluating cases of non-compliance. While displays of provocative missile launches have increased, none of the above demands have been met in the last decade, leading to a progressively punitive sanctions regime (see Table 1).

Please note that footnotes contain hyperlinks that will redirect to their respective source.

¹North Korea threatens more missile tests - Asia - Pacific - International Herald Tribune. (2006, July 6th). New York Times.

Table 1: Summary of UNSC resolutions imposing sanctions on the DPRK

Resolution & Date	Key Content	Trigger for Council Action
1718 ² Oct. 14 th 2006	Implements arms embargo, asset freeze, and travel ban on individuals connected to nuclear activities. Bans several imports and exports - including but not limited to: (i) combat-related goods, (ii) any goods that could contribute to nuclear-related, ballistic missile-related or other weapons of mass destruction-related programs, and (iii) luxury goods.	Detonation of a nuclear device on October 9 th 2006.
1874 ³ June 12 th 2009	Tightens restrictions on arms exports and imports and related material (except import of small arms and light weapons and their related material). Urges Member States to avert financial services or transfer of financial resources that could contribute to nuclear activities. Encourages Member States to inspect ships and destroy any cargo related to prohibited nuclear programs.	Underground detonation of a nuclear device conducted on May 25 th 2009.
2087 ⁴ Jan. 22 nd 2013	Implements targeted sanctions at four individuals and 6 entities (qualifying criteria for targeted sanctions expanded to include entities/individuals that have assisted in the evasion of sanctions or in the violation of the resolutions). Clarifies and develops Member States' rights to seize and destroy material that is suspected of serving prohibited programs.	Launch of Earth observation spacecraft on December 12 th 2012.
2094 ⁵ Mar. 7 th 2013	Enacts targeted financial sanctions. Imposes sanctions on money transfers to and from the DPRK. Expands and further defines the list of prohibited items that could contribute to nuclear-related, ballistic missile-related, or other weapons of mass destruction-related programs as well as luxury goods. Implements targeted sanctions at two individuals and two entities (qualifying criteria expanded).	Underground nuclear test on February 12 th 2013.
2270 ⁶ Mar. 2 nd 2016	Obliges all Member States to release all North Korean diplomats that are suspected to be involved in illegal activities of their service. Bans the export of coal, iron (except for livelihood purposes), gold, vanadium, titanium, and rare earth metals. Imposes sectoral sanctions on fuel. Requires all Member States to expel North Korean private citizens involved in illegal activities. Implements targeted sanctions at 16 individuals and 12 entities. Expands ban on luxury items. Expands arms embargo and non-proliferation measures to include small arms and light weapons. Implements new cargo restrictions (including but not limited to mandatory inspection on cargo destined to and originating from the DPRK). Enforces new financial restrictions (including but not limited to an asset freeze on the North Korean government as well as prohibiting DPRK banks from opening branches abroad and vice versa).	Detonation of a nuclear device on January 6 th 2016.
2321 Nov. 30 th 2016	Caps the amount/value of coal exports from the DPRK. Bans exports and imports of statues, copper, nickel, silver, and zinc. Expands arms embargo and adds new items to the luxury goods ban. Tightens restrictions on fuel ban. Designates targeted sanctions at an additional 11 individuals and 10 entities. Several restrictions on DPRK diplomatic missions and consular posts abroad, including capping the number of staff.	Nuclear detonation on September 9 th 2016
2371 ⁷ Aug. 15 th 2017	Full ban on coal, iron, iron ore, lead, and lead ore. Caps the number of DPRK laborers used to generate foreign export earnings. Prohibits the export of seafood. Expands financial sanctions and restrictions on North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank. Designates targeted sanctions against additional 9 individuals and 4 entities.	Test of Intercontinental Ballistic Missile on July 4 th , 2017
2375 ⁸ Sept. 11 th 2017	Imposes annual cap of 2 million barrels per year of all refined petroleum products (gasoline, diesel, heavy fuel oil, etc.). Bans all North Korean textile exports. Allows existing authorizations for North Korean laborers abroad to expire but denies any renewals (this will affect approx. 100,000 workers). Imposes an end to all joint ventures with North Korea. Imposes asset freezes on the most important North Korean regime organs.	Launch of Ballistic Missile over Japan on August 29 th , as well as a thermo-nuclear weapon (hydrogen bomb) on September 3 rd 2017.

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²UNSC Resolution 1718. (2006).UN Documents.

³UNSC Resolution 1874. (2009).UN Documents.

⁴UNSC Resolution 2087. (2013).UN Documents.

⁵UNSC Resolution 2094. (2013).UN Documents.

⁶UNSC Resolution 2270. (2016).UN Documents.

⁷UNSC Resolution 2371.(2017).UN Documents.

⁸FACT SHEET: Resolution 2375 (2017) Strengthening Sanctions on North Korea. (2017). United States Mission to the United Nations.

A shift from smart to more comprehensive sanctions

As can be observed from Table 1 an evolution in the nature of sanctions has steadily progressed since 2006. Leading up to 2013, sanctions (S/RES/1718, S/RES/1874, S/RES/2087) mainly consisted of targeted sanctions (asset freeze and travel ban) against high-ranking party and military officials in addition to an arms embargo (against combat-related goods) and restrictions on dual-use technologies as well as luxury items. These narrowly targeted sanctions, also called “smart sanctions”, are designed to be directed at the North Korean leadership without harming ordinary civilians. A shift from smart sanctions can be identified since 2013, when the UNSC started to agree upon more comprehensive sanctions. Resolutions 2094, 2270, 2321, 2371, and 2375 have implemented a more holistic approach by including:

- (i) Sanctions on money transfers;
- (ii) Export bans on textiles, seafood, coal, iron, iron ore, gold, vanadium, titanium, copper, nickel, silver, zinc, and rare earth metals;
- (iii) Sectoral sanctions on minerals and refined petroleum products;
- (iv) Ban on future DPRK laborers used to generate foreign remittances.

In theory UN sanctions are supposed to disrupt destructive behavior by undermining a country's economic capabilities and by disheartening the government's domestic backing. As internal frustration and pressure grows, those in power would ideally yield to the demands made by the international community. In the case of a secluded and repressive authoritarian regime like North Korea this theory, however, faces a whole host of challenges. As there is no democratic process in North Korea, the government is not responsive to the discontentment of its own people. Domestic backing in this sense refers to an elite group of leadership supporting the regime. Despite increasingly strict sanctions the Kim Regime seems unwilling to make any concessions and is continuing its missile and nuclear program against all warnings.

GDP growth in DPRK of 1-5% annually despite sanctions

This conduct begs the question whether the imposed sanctions regime can achieve its intended effect. Although the country is considered impoverished, its economy is on an upward trajectory. Experts estimate that its GDP is growing 1%-5% annually⁹, with the Seoul-based Bank of Korea estimating a 3.9% GDP growth in 2016¹⁰.

There are several reasons why such a heavily sanctioned country can sustain positive economic growth. As mentioned above, the UNSC sanctions regime focused on more narrowly targeted measures in its early stages. These are not meant to cripple the overall economy but rather disproportionately affect the ruling elite as well as military programs. Furthermore, with regards to more comprehensive UN sanctions, it is well-known that their effective enforcement and oversight has faced many challenges. The more recent comprehensive sanctions included the 2016 cap on coal exports (S/RES/2321) and the 2017 full ban on coal exports (S/RES/2371) – targeting the part of North Korea's economy which makes up almost a third of the nation's export revenues (see Figure 3). Although these drastic measures were intended to halt the cash influx available to the Kim Regime and despite the fact that China (which accounts for approx. 85% of North Korea's total trade¹¹ and 99% of its coal sales) pledged to end all coal imports from the DPRK for the rest of the year, the effects were limited. Critics suspect that due to a lack of tangible oversight and “secondary sanctions” (sanctions against countries that are cooperating with the DPRK in defiance of the

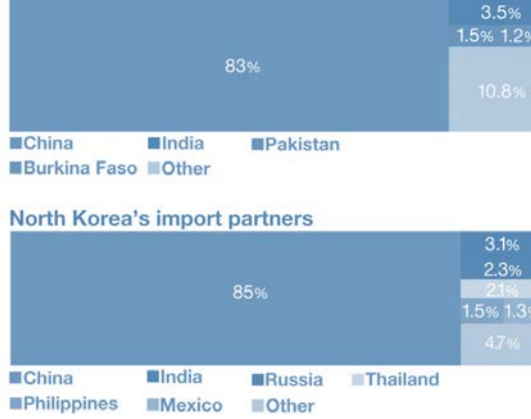
⁹ Why the North Korean economy is growing. (2017, June 27th). The Economist.

¹⁰ North Korea's Economy Is Growing at Its Fastest Pace Since 1999. (2017, July 20th). Bloomberg.

¹¹ Ruediger, F. (2015). North Korea's Foreign Trade. U.S.-Korea Institute, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.

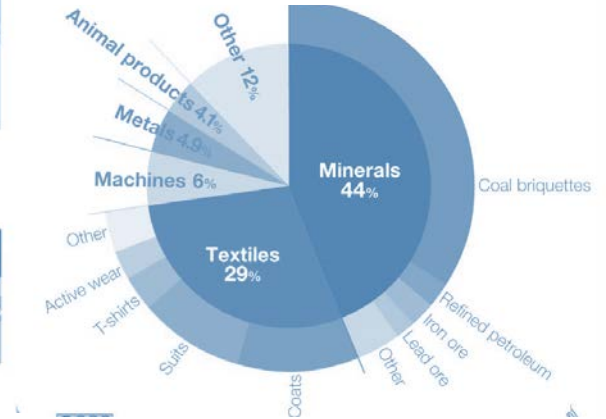
sanctions regime), trade relations between China (as well as other countries) and North Korea are merely transitioning into a more covert practice.^{12 13}

Figure 2: Where does North Korea export to?



Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity

Figure 3: What does North Korea export?



Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity

Hand in hand with semi-official and covert trade goes the allegedly highly developed shadow economy in North Korea. Illegal activities such as drug trafficking, smuggling of contraband, and counterfeiting currency seem to be essential revenue streams for the Kim Regime. To target these activities is almost impossible; much to the contrary, they often may even provide new channels and networks to evade sanctions. Arms trade is one of the industries which has been heavily sanctioned (decreased by 90% since 2006 as a consequence of UNSC resolutions), however it is estimated that the DPRK still makes approx. US\$ 100 million per year through illicit arms trade.¹⁴ Another major source of hard currency inflow for North Korea are foreign remittances generated through citizens that are sent abroad (mainly to China, Russia, and the Middle East). These workers are often employed in construction, the textile industry, or mining and are obligated to turn the majority of their wages over to their government, which is estimated to earn the Kim Regime around US\$ 1.2 billion per annum.¹⁵

To crack down on the government's liquidity by hitting parts of the country's economy that produce steady sources of revenue, resolution 2375 bans foreign remittances entirely as soon as current permits expire. Additionally, the latest sanctions are aimed at the textile industry, which accounts for the country's second largest export goods. The sanctions of resolution 2375 place a full ban on textile trade, costing the DPRK approx. US\$760 million annually according to US State Department estimates. Adding up all sanctions imposed, 90% of the country's exports (coal, textiles, iron, and seafood) are now banned, which is said to accumulate to losses around US\$2.5 billion annually.¹⁶

On Thursday, September 14th 2017 and thereby only two days after the Security Council passed its latest sanctions pursuant to resolution 2375, North Korea launched another missile over Japan into the Pacific Ocean in its continued defiance of the UN sanctions regime.

¹²How North Korea makes its money: Coal, forced labor and hacking. (2017, April 5th). CNN Money.

¹³Why the North Korean economy is growing. (2017, June 27th). The Economist.

¹⁴Weissmann, M., & Hagström, L. (2016). Sanctions Reconsidered: the Path Forward with North Korea. The Washington Quarterly.

¹⁵North Korea Sends Hundreds Of 'State-Sponsored Slaves' To Europe: Rights Group. (2016, July 6th). Huffington Post.

¹⁶FACT SHEET: Resolution 2375 (2017) Strengthening Sanctions on North Korea. (2017). United States Mission to the United Nations.

North Koreans working abroad send back up to US\$ 1.2 billion / year

2. The UN conundrum with the DPRK: Sanctioning an unresponsive regime while continuing to provide humanitarian assistance for people in need

North Korea is ranked among the lowest 25% (ranked 98th) out of the 118 countries assessed in the Global Hunger Index.¹⁷ The country faces a recurrent cycle of natural disasters (floods and droughts) which often lead to famines and disease outbreaks. As a consequence of these dire circumstances the United Nations has been providing assistance to the DPRK even before it became a Member State in 1991. WHO started their work as early as 1972, UNDP's programs commenced in 1985, and UNFPA launched their first projects in 1985. Three more UN agencies started their humanitarian assistance in the 1990s (see Table 2).

In addition to the pervasive poverty, experts and advocacy groups throughout the international community had long suspected harrowing and widespread human rights violations in North Korea. In 2013 the United Nations Human Rights Council finally passed resolution A/HRC/RES/22/13, thereby creating the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). This team of experts was tasked with the investigation of possible Human Rights violations in North Korea. The commission found atrocities that they concluded to qualify as genocide, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes. The report determined: "The gravity, scale and nature of these [human rights] violations reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world."¹⁸

There are currently six UN-organizations implementing development and humanitarian relief programs on the ground. These agencies operate in an extremely challenging environment, trying to navigate their vital programs under a regime that barely tolerates their presence.

These six agencies form what is referred to as the UN country team of the DPRK as they implement their programs in close coordination with each other. They cooperate with local partners¹⁹ through weekly harmonization meetings and in regular Sector Working Groups (SWGs). The SWGs ensure the coordination of sectoral interventions and communicate sector knowledge, thereby guaranteeing that synergies are effectively utilized. Working groups exist on Food Security and Agriculture, Nutrition, Health, as well as Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH).

The "Strategic Framework for the cooperation between the UN and the DPRK" (UNSF) outlines the UN's development goals and objectives for the period 2017 – 2021 in accordance with the North Korean government. As long-term areas of focus the UNSF determines four strategic priorities: food and nutrition security, social development services, resilience and sustainability as well as data and development management.

¹⁷Global Hunger Index. (2016).

¹⁸ Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.(2014).A/HRC/25/63.

¹⁹ International NGOs active in North Korea include: Première Urgence Internationale, Save the Children, Concern Worldwide, Deutsche Welthungerhilfe, Triangle Génération Humanitaire and Handicap International

Severe Human Rights violations
in the DPRK

Six UN-organizations working
inside the DPRK

Table 2: Overview of UN agencies proving humanitarian assistance in the DPRK

	World Health Organization (WHO) ²⁰	United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ²¹	United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) ²²	World Food Programme (WFP) ²³	United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) ²⁴	Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) ²⁵
Active since	1972	1979	1985	1995	1996	1998
Key Development Efforts in the DPRK	<p>Promotes evidence-based policy formulation, technical assistance, monitoring and evaluation, resource mobilization, and direct implementation of healthcare projects</p> <p>Assists the government in strengthening health infrastructure</p> <p>Executes programs against communicable and non-communicable diseases</p> <p>Ensures essential medicines and laboratory services</p>	<p>Strengthens the resilience of communities through Community-Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM)</p> <p>Strengthens Ecosystem Resilience and Community Adaptive Capacity in Climate Affected River Basins (SER-CARB)</p> <p>Finds Sustainable Energy Solutions for Rural Livelihoods in DPRK (SES)</p> <p>Executes a pilot project to support Socio-Economic Development of Rural Areas in DPRK (SED)</p>	<p>Provides reproductive health: maternal and new born health, expansion of family planning services, development of reproductive health-related strategies, guidelines and protocols in hospitals</p> <p>Supports North Korea research institutions to strengthen their capacity to generate, analyze, and disseminate reliable population data</p> <p>Provides emergency humanitarian response and supplies life-saving maternal and reproductive health supplies</p>	<p>Provides nutrition assistance to children and women</p> <p>Implements Food for Disaster Risk Reduction (FDRR)</p> <p>Supports the local production of fortified food (a mix of maize or wheat, soybeans, vegetable oil, dried milk, sugar, and a premix of vitamins and minerals)</p>	<p>Seeks to improve health, nutrition, education, and sanitation for children</p> <p>Offers immunization against childhood diseases</p> <p>Works for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups by closing the development gap between rural and urban areas</p> <p>Advocates for national policy conducive for children through technical support to key ministries</p> <p>Relieves children's suffering during emergencies</p>	<p>Strengthens national food and nutritional security (through agroforestry, soybean cultivation, fruit production, and marine aquaculture)</p> <p>Improves natural resource management</p> <p>Improves rural livelihood by working towards agricultural self-reliance</p> <p>Strengthens institutional capacity for dealing with climate change, agricultural research, and administration</p>

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In addition to the mission's long-term goals the UNSF prescribes that the UN country team in Pyongyang has to publish a report every year assessing the DPRK's immediate needs and priorities. For 2017, specifically, the country team has determined the following strategic objectives as the focus of their joint work:

²⁰ WHO DPRK Country Team

²¹ UNDP DPRK Country Team

²² UNFPA DPRK Country Team

²³ WFP DPRK Country Team

²⁴ UNICEF DPRK Country Team

²⁵ FAO DPRK Country Team

Table 3: Overview of UN country team strategic objectives 2017 - 2021

Strategic Objective 2017 (1)	Improve the nutrition status of the most vulnerable people using a holistic approach that includes food security and screening for acute malnutrition.
Strategic Objective 2017 (2)	Reduce preventable mortality and morbidity through access to basic health services, as well as access to improved water, sanitation and hygiene services.
Strategic Objective 2017 (3)	Build the resilience of the most vulnerable people in DPRK to recurrent disasters, particularly floods and drought.

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Out of a population of 25 million, 18 million require some form of assistance for their food supplies.

The “Needs and Priorities Report” estimates that out of a population of approx. 25 million, 18 million North Korean citizens require some form of assistance as a consequence of food insecurity, deficiency in basic WASH services, and/or malnutrition. Undernutrition is still projected to affect 40% of the population, 3.5 million people are still lacking access to clean drinking water and 37% of the population has no access to a sustainable latrine system (see Table 4).

Table 4: Summary of UN country team determined Needs and Targets

SECTOR	TOTAL			BY SEX & AGE		UNDER 5		OVER 5	
	People in need (PIN)	People targeted*	% of PIN targeted	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %	Male %	Female %
Food Security	18,000,000	4,261,635	24%	2,032,097 48%	2,229,538 52%	77,346 2%	78,829 2%	1,954,751 46%	2,150,709 50%
Nutrition	4,600,000	2,509,843	55%	901,353 36%	1,608,490 64%	800,000 32%	800,000 32%	101,353 4%	808,490 32%
Health	15,400,000	12,888,942	84%	6,314,372 49%	6,574,570 51%	2,197,020 17%	2,286,934 18%	4,117,352 32%	4,287,636 33%
WASH	3,500,000	557,236	16%	264,761 48%	292,475 52%	50,511 9%	53,124 10%	214,250 38%	239,351 43%
TOTAL**	18,000,000	12,952,601	72%	6,328,313 49%	6,624,288 51%	2,197,020	2,286,934	4,131,294	4,337,354

Source: DPRK Needs and Priorities Report 2017

To add to the prevailing structures of poverty in the DPRK, which the UN has been fighting for decades, North Korea is now facing its worst drought since 2001. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) corn, rice, maize, potatoes, and other essential crops are impacted by the widespread effects of the drought. Highly concerned about the recurrence of a famine similar to the food shortage in the mid-1990, which killed approx. 1 million North Koreans, the UN is responding with emergency measures to prevent widespread malnutrition and the outbreak of illnesses.

3. *Balancing sanctions and humanitarian assistance*

During consultations for the latest sanctions-implementing resolution (2375) the US draft resolution proposed a full oil embargo. While this restriction would undoubtedly lead to a crippled economy and could thus potentially coerce Kim Jong-un to start negotiations on his nuclear program, experts asserted that such measures could lead to a humanitarian catastrophe with unimaginable consequences. This dilemma serves as a case in point and demonstrates the moral complexity in the charged relationship between sanctions and humanitarian assistance.

As outlined in the beginning of this article the nature of sanctions imposed on the DPRK seem to be developing from more narrowly targeted sanctions towards more comprehensive restrictions aimed at the overall economy of the country. While large parts of the population already lived in poverty prior to the sanctions regime these comprehensive measures still have the potential to further deteriorate the living conditions of average North Koreans.

The members of the Security Council regularly discuss the humanitarian impact of sanctions and elaborate efforts have been made to protect ordinary North Korean communities from economic distress. One example of the difficulties related to such efforts is showcased by a comparative analysis of resolution 2270(2016) and resolution 2371(2017). In resolution 2270 the Council deliberately tried to sanction a substantial part of North Korean exports, coal and iron, while adding an exemption for transactions that are purely intended to secure the livelihood of communities. This exemption attempted to protect populations that are dependent on the coal industry. Unfortunately, due to a lack of oversight, such exemptions have proven to be used as illicit loopholes. It is for this very reason that resolution 2371 now bans all coal and iron exports from North Korea without exemption.

In addition to the impact of sanctions on growth, jobs and wages, they moreover negatively influence the work of aid agencies. In the aforementioned "Needs and Priorities" report published by the UN country team in North Korea, sanctions are identified as unintentionally obstructing humanitarian operations on the ground. Tapan Mishra, resident coordinator of the UN country team in the DPRK, expressed concern that the sanctions regime is making donors reluctant to make funds available: "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is in the midst of a protracted, entrenched humanitarian situation largely forgotten or overlooked by the rest of the world. I appeal to donors not to let political considerations get in the way of providing continued support for humanitarian assistance and relief".²⁶ The report explains that as a consequence of a drastic decline in donor contributions for humanitarian aid in North Korea since 2012, UN resident agencies had to substantially decrease assistance, which resulted in a situation whereby the critical needs of the most vulnerable remained unmet.

This problem can be illustrated by comparing the fulfillment of humanitarian emergency funding in the Asia-Pacific region. Two countries issued a humanitarian appeal to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in 2016: the DRPK and Myanmar. A humanitarian appeal is issued in emergencies only and addresses acute humanitarian needs. While Myanmar's 111 million USD request was funded at 58%, the request issued by North Korea, over 39 million USD, was only funded at 27%.²⁷ For the year 2017, the "DPRK Needs and Priorities Report" is calling for US\$114 million as a prerequisite to cover the "urgent needs of the most vulnerable".

²⁶DPRK Needs and Priorities Report 2017.(2017).UN Country Team

²⁷Humanitarian Funding in Asia-Pacific. (2016). OCHA.

The report further assesses that sanctions have caused consistent disruptions in interactions of banking channels, often making monetary transfers impossible. Additionally, as some provisions within the sanctions regime require licenses for the transportation of goods to the DPRK, aid workers have faced considerable delays on the passage of humanitarian cargo. These suspensions are especially problematic when a humanitarian emergency requires swift actions.

The conundrum of simultaneously applied sanctions and humanitarian assistance faces criticism from opposite sides. Scholars like Dursun Perksen and Thomas Weiss argue, for example, that sanctions rarely lead to the desired outcome but rather have the opposite effect – causing economic anguish and humanitarian disasters. On the other hand, critics of humanitarian assistance to the DPRK argue that aid funding allows Kim Jong-un to spend a disproportionate amount of government resources on the nuclear program instead of using it to the benefit of his impoverished citizens, thus indirectly weakening the effects of the sanctions regime. Some also argue that the Kim Regime has used humanitarian assistance as a political bargaining tool, knowing that countries like South Korea and the USA have an interest in protecting Human Rights.

There is just no sugar-coating it and there should not be. While a combination of diplomatic efforts and sanctions currently seem to be the only path forward, the current sanctions regime – especially due to its latest additions in 2016 and 2017 – is going to hurt ordinary North Korean communities. Specifically, export-dependent jobs are threatened like mine workers, fishermen, and factory staff. It is known that not just families but entire communities depend on these industries. In turn, to diminish the weakening effect of humanitarian assistance on the efficiency of the sanctions regime, the UN country team needs to ensure appropriate oversight over all assistance. Slashing its funding could therefore prove counterproductive as it would decrease the mission's capacity to ensure that aid funding is exclusively directed at vulnerable populations.

4. Conclusion and outlook

In conclusion it is vital to note that some of the UN agencies referred to in this article commenced their work in the DPRK in the early 1970s, under Kim Il-sung. While North Korea's efforts to establish a nuclear program date back to the 1950s, provocations and aggressions on today's scale did not exist when aid agencies started their work. Humanitarian assistance in the case of North Korea is thereby not a wasteful byproduct of Security Council resolutions, but rather a humanitarian commitment by the UN that predates the sanctions regime on North Korea.

In light of the Security Council's record on Syria the body is often criticized for its lack of tangible action at the mercy of national interests. In the case of North Korea the Council seems more and more united as the provocations from the Kim Regime manifest themselves in an increasingly threatening manner. For those however who suspect a wholly altered dynamic among the P5, a look at the latest resolution (2375) will prove useful. While in the days leading up to the Council vote on September 11th 2017 the new resolution was hailed as strict in an unprecedented manner, the text that was actually adopted ended up adding moderate restrictions to the sanctions regime. While consultations were held in a closed setting, it is widely believed that Russia and China made the case for the watered-down resolution. Of course, as mentioned earlier in this article, a full oil embargo as initially proposed by the US potentially would have had detrimental humanitarian effects anyway.

However, the softening of the latest sanctions will certainly continue to intensify the debate surrounding Russia's and China's commitment to the sanctions regime.

China of course remains the key figure that will likely determine the outcome of the North Korea conflict. Although China's interests in sustaining the DPRK are well known and documented, the escalations under the leadership of Kim Jong-un could potentially also hurt Beijing's quest to be considered a reliable global leader. Although the increasingly strict resolutions in 2016 and 2017 – such as individual initiatives like banning coal imports (February 2017) or suspending North Korean accounts at Chinese banks (September 2017) – could be regarded as indicators for a change in policy, it remains to be seen if actions will follow words.

The rise of tensions surrounding the North Korea conflict begs the question which other restrictions the Council still has available to apply pressure on Pyongyang. The most commonly cited potential future sanctions include a full oil embargo, a naval blockade to ensure enforcement of existing UN sanctions, secondary sanctions on banks and countries, and restrictions on Air Koryo (DPRK's state-owned airline). Contrary to what one might assume, targeted sanctions (asset freeze and travel ban) against Kim Jong-un and some members of his immediate inner circle have not been implemented so far and thus are potential future pressure tools available to the Council.

For the Security Council it remains vital to renew the mandate for the Panel of Experts which expires in April 2018 and to work on increasing the compliance mechanisms of Council resolutions. Enforcement needs to be prioritized, first and foremost by ensuring that Member States submit their sanctions implementation reports, 116 of which (total of 193 required) had not been handed in as of February 2017. Looking forward, a focus on smart sanctions that target leadership and military programs and are designed to be as narrow as possible, should remain a priority.

However, as outlined in this article, a shift from targeted sanctions to comprehensive sanctions has been identified, which will burden innocent civilians. If the Kim Regime does not change its policies, the Security Council will have no alternative but to continue to choose from a set of bad choices. Responses from the international community to aggressions from the Kim Regime will remain firm, since any further cultivation of the North Korean nuclear and missile program could lead to an arms race in the region, which could have disastrous consequences not only in Asia but beyond. As explained earlier in this article, sanctions will ideally undermine a country's economic capabilities and increase the pressure on leadership by disheartening the government's domestic backing. Since this concept does not apply to an authoritarian regime like North Korea, the UNSC – while imposing sanctions – has the responsibility to safeguard affected humans without a choice in the matter. The paradox of sanctioning a country while simultaneously providing humanitarian assistance will remain a reality for now. While comprehensive sanctions that affect ordinary citizens should remain a measure of last resort, if they are implemented, a simultaneous diplomatic effort of engagement is of utmost importance. Until a solution is found, the supply of humanitarian assistance by the United Nations must remain a non-negotiable necessity that stands for the UN's commitment to leave no one behind. The consideration of the humanitarian impact caused by sanctions must therefore remain an integral part of sanctions negotiations in the Security Council in order to ensure that the effects on civilians will be as minimal as possible.