



WILL TOUGHER SANCTIONS HALT NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR AMBITIONS?

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SYNOPSIS

The international community is in a quandary on how to contain North Korea's nuclear ambitions. The main policy options, tougher sanctions and threats of military force, have failed to halt North Korea's developing nuclear and missile programs. Without China's cooperation, there is little that Australia or the international community can do to dissuade North Korea's nuclear ambitions. The only viable long-term solution is for a renewed effort to persuade China to revise its policies towards North Korea. Australia could play an important role in any future response by the international community. Through diplomatic channels, Australian policy-makers could convince China to place increased pressure on the North Korean regime.

NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR AND MISSILE PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

North Korea's nuclear weapons program has been in development for many decades, and have conducted nuclear tests in 2006, 2009, 2013, twice in 2016 and once in 2017. These [tests](#) have successively increased in explosive yield—with Pyongyang claiming that its tests in January [2016](#) and September [2017](#) were hydrogen bombs (also known as a thermonuclear bomb), which is a more powerful type of nuclear weapon. NORSAR, a Norway based nuclear monitoring group, [estimate](#) that the September 2017 test had an “explosive yield at 120 kilotons TNT, based on a seismic magnitude of

5.8.” NORSAR further stated, “it is not possible from the seismic data alone to determine if this was a test of a hydrogen bomb, but we can say in general that the credibility of the claim increases with increasing explosive yield”.

Furthermore, North Korea have tested numerous short, medium and long range missile delivery systems, with varying success. Accurate delivery of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) is the most concerning capability being pursued. If the Kim regime is able to mount a miniaturised nuclear warhead atop an ICBM, it may then possess the capability to strike Australia and the west coast of the US. Stanford University’s [Prof Siegfried S Hecker](#) estimates that North Korea’s “ability to field an ICBM fitted with a nuclear warhead capable of reaching the United States is still a long way off—perhaps 5 to 10 years.” However, North Korea does possess operational and tested short and medium range [ballistic missiles](#), which could potentially deliver a nuclear warhead. These types of missiles are no threat to strike Australia or mainland United States (U.S), but could target key regional allies South Korea or Japan.

WHY SANCTIONS HAVE FAILED

Following North Korea’s six nuclear tests—along with numerous missile tests, the international community has placed numerous sanctions on the regime. Australia has supported United Nations Security Council (UNSC) measures in the past, and placed its own [bilateral](#) sanctions on North Korea. The UNSC’s [resolutions](#) 2270 and 2321 have placed the strongest sanctions to date, with increased bans on importing or exporting military equipment, nuclear technology, and natural resources such as coal and iron ore. Financial asset freezes targeting senior regime officials have also accompanied these resolutions. These sanctions aim to pressure North Korea into discontinuing its nuclear program, but after over a decade in force, the economic damage inflicted has failed to quell the regime’s determined ambitions. Instead the North Korean people have suffered and regional stability on the Korean peninsula has deteriorated.

International sanctions have failed due to the Kim regime managing to protect the core members of the Korean Workers party from the economic effects of the sanctions. Much of this is down to operating [global-front companies](#) and maintaining economic ties with various Asian, African and Middle Eastern countries. Illicit revenues have been sourced through money laundering, arms-dealing and sending workers overseas. With this revenue the Kim regime has rewarded North Korean ruling elites with a life of luxury and secured their loyalty.

Over the last few years, the international community has identified and shuttered many of these global front companies, but countless more have gone undetected. For example, a 2017 [UNSC report](#)

said that a North Korean global front company (Glocom) – reportedly run by the country's intelligence agency – was found operating out of a Kuala Lumpur office in Malaysia. The company, an unregistered firm in Malaysia, was trying to sell military radio systems to international buyers. The report's authors concluded that numerous front companies continue to evade detection and generate revenue for North Korea. Furthermore, the UNSC report outlined that North Korea is still able to access the global banking system and partner in joint ventures with foreign companies.

CHINA'S BEHAVIOUR AND INTERESTS

China's inconsistencies in supporting even tougher, more pressured measures, or fully enforce prior sanctions on Pyongyang have stifled an adequate response from the international community. Since China agreed to more stringent sanctions in 2016, China have been taking increased steps to [enforce](#) the UN sanction regime, even placing their own trade embargos on North Korea. [Reports](#) and statements by the Chinese authorities suggest that they are taking a tougher policy approach towards North Korea. For example, China [suspended](#) the import of North Korean coal for one year, which Chinese authorities have enforced by [preventing ships](#) suspected of carrying coal from docking. However, [reports](#) from Chinese ports, suggests that some coal shipments are still slipping through inspections. Also, China's customs check points at the borders have increased its checking and confiscation of prohibited goods under UN sanctions.

This increased enforcement of the sanction regime is a change in policy, but it has been inconsistent, with still a large amount of prohibited goods still making it across the border into North Korea. In Chinese border towns like [Dandong](#), local businessmen report that tougher sanctions and the Chinese authorities' increased enforcement measures have stifled trade along the border, but traders are finding loop-holes, allowing trucks to still cross the [border](#), carrying a variety of banned goods. These reports are backed up by the UNSC, which states that there are inconsistencies in enforcing the sanction regime.

Although there are inconsistencies in preventing illegal trading across the border, China in recent years has changed its stance towards North Korea, and the international sanctions regime. Before UNSCR 2270, China had [closer relations](#) with North Korea, offering military, economic and political support to the regime in Pyongyang. Today China is becoming [impatient](#) with North Korea's aggressive nuclear development and the provocative missile tests it has conducted over its neighbour's airspace. Although China fears that tougher sanctions or military action could lead to regime collapse, they also do not want Pyongyang to possess more potent nuclear capabilities, that could severely destabilise the region.

China is showing signs that it is willing to take a stronger position towards North Korea, if the latter continues to antagonise the international community and carry on testing nuclear weapons and advanced missile systems. This understanding could open the door for Australia and the rest of the international community to seek further partnership with China in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue and stabilise the Asia-Pacific region.

IMPLICATIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The key to resolving the North Korean question is China and their long-term policy of economic and political support for the Kim regime. To overcome China's policies will be tough, and may require strategic negotiations between China and the rest of the international community on what would be a suitable solution to the issue over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. Australia could play a major supporting role in partnership with the U.S and other regional allies in negotiations with China concerning North Korea. For instance, Australia's strong [economic](#) relationship with China, could be used to place pressure on Beijing. Although Australia has a strong economic relationship with China, Australia also has a strategic alliance with the U.S and other regional powers. Australia will have to balance these two differing interests because we would want to continue strengthening our economic relationship with China on the one hand, and on the other, support our security partners in the Asia-Pacific. At this stage, Australia would be better off placing emphasis on China to increase its own pressure on Pyongyang through diplomatic channels and informal media statements, rather than supporting the strengthening of international sanctions, which have consistently proven ineffective.

CONCLUSION

Sanctions have failed to pressure the North Korean regime into halting its nuclear and missile program, and any future options to resolving the crisis will require cooperation with China. Australia, which has a strong and continuing economic relationship with China, could play a role in fostering this cooperation. China does not want a regime collapse or reunification because this outcome could lead to a major refugee crisis. Moreover, a unified democratic Korea might also extend US military presence closer to the Chinese border. Yet, despite these concerns, China also wants to prevent North Korea from acquiring more advanced nuclear capabilities. The best option for Australia is to move away from supporting more sanctions and concentrate on finding a political solution with China. This policy option would benefit the continued bilateral relationship with China, and could lead to a

workable solution to the North Korean crisis without conflict or instability within the Asia-Pacific region.