

Weaponizing Humanitarian Aid

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Long ago, US foreign aid programs honored the principle that humanitarian aid should be treated separately from economic and military assistance to governments. Public Law 480 (popularized as “Food for Peace”), which began under President Eisenhower in the 1960s and expanded under President Kennedy, was mainly intended (in Kennedy’s words) to “narrow the gap between abundance here at home and near starvation abroad.” It was a simple and ethical goal, though it applied only to “friendly” countries and therefore had the secondary aim, as Kennedy admitted, to be a barrier against communism.

The original humane goal has now vanished, and the secondary political aim has taken its place. The Trump administration is explicitly using humanitarian aid as another weapon to sanction adversaries. North Korea is the prime example. After decades providing humanitarian aid by private citizens and NGOs, Americans will no longer be able to send or deliver it: the decision includes denial of permission to travel to North Korea to deliver aid. Programs that made perceptible contributions to economic development and health care in North Korea, and built trust, will now be grounded.

The American Friends Service Committee, Nautilus Institute, Mercy Corps, Northwest Medical Teams, and other well-established NGOs are among the affected organizations.

All this in the name of the Trump administration’s policy of “maximum pressure” to force North Korea to take tangible steps toward verifiable denuclearization. The administration justifies the ban as necessary to protect Americans from being taken prisoner and eliminate a source of hard currency for the North Korean regime. But those are excuses; humanitarian aid is a carrot now turned into a stick because Trump’s summit meeting with Kim Jong-un has failed to bring denuclearization any closer to realization and has no interest in an incentives-based engagement strategy.

Keith Luse, executive director of the National Committee on North Korea, a group that supports engagement, points out in a message to members (which includes me) that “a line has been crossed.”

American citizens and NGOs have provided humanitarian assistance to that country for decades. Whether motivated by a faith-based perspective—or out of a compassionate nature—all have been committed to saving the lives of the neediest of North Korea’s citizens, including children, the elderly and pregnant mothers. Thousands of North Koreans neglected by their own government, particularly in rural areas, know their lives have been impacted, or saved because of the intervention of the American people. It has become clear that the Trump Administration regards the provision of humanitarian assistance to the North Korean people as a legitimate target for its maximum pressure campaign.

Despite improvements in its economy, North Korea's public health and food circumstances remain dire. The World Food Programme reports a shortfall of over \$15 million for its work in North Korea.

Ten million people—40 percent of the population—are said to be undernourished, and roughly 20 percent of children suffer from chronic malnourishment. The White House, where the president periodically extols his friendship with Kim Jong-un, has said nothing about the human condition in North Korea. But even if it did, US termination of humanitarian aid to North Korea would undermine its criticisms of human rights there.

In the United Nations, the US position makes Russia and China look good. Their representatives have called for rewarding North Korea for its diplomacy and its focus since April 2018 on economic development rather than on the byongjin line of parallel military and economic development. Moscow and Beijing have both argued in the Security Council for North Korean exemptions from UN sanctions. A Chinese foreign ministry statement of June 12, 2018 said:

The UN Security Council resolutions that have been passed say that if North Korea respects and acts in accordance with the resolutions, then sanction measures can be adjusted, including to pause or remove the relevant sanctions. China has consistently held that sanctions are not the goal in themselves. The Security Council's actions should support and conform to the efforts of current diplomatic talks towards denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula, and promote a political solution for the peninsula.

But to date Washington, with veto power in the Security Council, has taken a firm line on UN sanctions. In the White House's view, reflected for example in a statement of August 29, 2018, China's food and fuel assistance to North Korea—which typically amounts to 70 percent of North Korean imports—is “not helpful.” The White House is fighting a losing battle, however. Since the Trump-Kim summit, leakage in the UN sanctions regime has increased significantly as neither Russia nor China feels duty bound to honor it as before, particularly when it comes to oil. South Korean humanitarian aid also enters the picture as inter-Korean talks move ahead. North-South Korea agreements so far have greatly reduced military tensions along the demilitarized zone and at sea, paving the way for renewal of a South Korean-funded industrial zone and resort complex just across the DMZ in the North. But the Trump administration stands in the way of South Korean aid to the North.

In response to Seoul's interest in lifting trade and investment sanctions, Trump said:

“They won't do it without our approval. They do nothing without our approval.”

North Korea is not an isolated case. Iran is also subject to “maximum pressure” and worse—meaning regime change—as became apparent in a speech by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on May 28, 2018. Officially, Trump's imposition of sanctions on Iran following withdrawal from the Obama-era nuclear deal separates humanitarian aid from US sanctions on Iran's banks, oil, airlines, and other industries. But in fact humanitarian aid requires the same bank processing as any other aid, making food and medicine imports hard to find under US sanctions. As Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said:

“The US has imposed financial sanctions on Iran. When you want to transfer

money, the bank does not ask whether it goes for food or other items—that is why sanctions always hit food and medicine.”

Economic sanctions do hurt. Iran’s Zarif has said as much, while also saying that sanctions “strengthen the resolve to resist. The North Koreans have not acknowledged the pain but have demanded an end to US sanctions as a condition of further dialogue. A major problem with sanctions, surely applicable to Iran and North Korea, is that they arouse nationalist resistance in the targeted regime. Studies of sanctions show, moreover, that they have a poor record when it comes to forcing policy changes

As for sanctions on humanitarian aid, the core issue is moral as well as economic. The people most affected by such sanctions are, of course, those who are most in need of basic necessities. Political leaders, the military, and residents in the capital rarely suffer. Moreover, loss of direct contact by aid groups with ordinary people undermines opportunities to build goodwill and nurture diplomatic engagement. In short, weaponizing humanitarian aid has no upside even in a policy based on “maximum pressure.”

The future of humanitarian aid is grim. The sheer number of people in need around the world almost defies imagination. Food and health deficits in North Korea and Iran pose one kind of humanitarian need. They are caught in the middle of international rivalries, like the half-million Yemenis displaced by war and the “caravans” of people fleeing Central American violence and trapped in Mexico. But then there are the over 60 million displaced and transnational refugees and migrants who are victims of natural catastrophes (including climate change), war, and persecution.

Five countries—Afghanistan, Myanmar, Somalia, Syria, and South Sudan—account for two-thirds of today’s refugees according to Mercy Corps and Amnesty International. The global map is pockmarked with encampments, many of them permanent, as governments struggle either to support or find a way to remove hundreds of thousands of people. Governments that put out the welcome sign for such people, like Germany and Lebanon, risk being ousted by the current tidal force of anti-immigrant sentiment. And in the United Nations, refugee fatigue is an old problem, and funding relief has long since become a mission impossible.

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