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NEWS ANALYSIS

Will Sanctions Ever Work on North Korea?

By [MARTIN FACKLER](#) and [CHOE SANG-HUN](#)
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SEOUL, South Korea — North Korean threats and weapons tests followed by American-led sanctions and short-lived deals have become an all-too-familiar pattern in the world's response to [North Korea's nuclear program](#). With the Security Council having [approved a new round of sanctions](#), the question is whether there are real pressure points that even the hermetic North Korean government will respond to or is this all just window dressing?

In the newest round of sanctions after [North Korea's second nuclear test on May 25](#), the United States and allies like Japan and South Korea have brought back measures, such as freezing the North's overseas bank accounts, that seemed most painful to the government in the past.

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Diplomats call the new sanctions, which also include high-seas searches of North Korean ships for unconventional weapons, potentially some of the most potent yet aimed at [North Korea](#). But Russia and China resisted calls to make them mandatory, so it remains unclear how great an impact they will have.

But mandatory or not, many analysts and former diplomats questioned whether any sanctions regime would ever have enough bite to break the cycle.

"Sanctions won't bring North Korea to its knees," said Kim Keun-sik, a specialist on North Korea at Kyungnam University in Seoul. "The North knows this very well, from having lived with economic sanctions of one sort or another for the past 60 years."

Most analysts agree that the most effective measures are those that target the lifestyle of North Korean leaders: financial sanctions aimed at ending all banking transactions related to North Korea's weapons trade, and halting most grants and loans. This would effectively freeze many of the North's overseas bank accounts, cutting off the funds that North Korean leader [Kim Jong-il](#) has used to secure the cognac, Swiss watches and other luxury items needed to buy the loyalty of his country's elites.

The United States has also accused the North of using such offshore accounts to launder counterfeited dollars and for narcotics trafficking, criminal activities that the Treasury Department estimates earn the government as much as \$700 million annually in hard currency.

A similar tactic was tried in 2005, when \$25 million in North Korean accounts was frozen at Banco Delta Asia, an obscure institution in the Chinese territory of Macao. To the surprise of many at the time, the measure brought howls of protest from North Korea.

"The sanctions against B.D.A. hit the regime where it hurts," said Lee Sang-hyun, a North Korea specialist at the [Sejong Institute](#), a private research institute, using the

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bank's abbreviation.

However, some analysts and former officials here blame the financial sanctions for having the opposite effect, provoking the North and hardening its resolve. Some link the B.D.A. sanctions to the North's first nuclear test, which came just a year later, in October 2006.

"The sanctions against B.D.A. hurt, but in the end did they work? No, the North responded by just spitting in America's face with the nuclear test," said Jeong Se-hyun, who as unification minister was one of the South's top negotiators with North Korea during the administrations of former presidents Kim Dae-jung and [Roh Moo-hyun](#), who were often at odds with Washington over pressure on North Korea.

This time, in addition to financial sanctions, the proposed Security Council resolution calls for a tighter arms embargo, possible interdiction of North Korean vessels. But most analysts say that none of the threats are large enough to stop a government that sees [nuclear weapons](#) as the key to its survival, and that has endured decades of economic sanctions and hardships, including even starvation, rather than capitulate to outside pressure.

"These are people who didn't flinch even when 2 million of their own people died of hunger," said Lee Ji-sue, a North Korea specialist at Myongji University.

And that is assuming that the sanctions are fully enforced. While many of these same measures have been included in previous [United Nations](#) resolutions, nations like China and Russia were reluctant to enforce them to avoid antagonizing the North.

Critics and proponents alike agree that the linchpin in making any sanctions work is China, North Korea's primary aid and trade partner. China shares an 850-mile border with North Korea, and its \$2 billion annual trade with the North accounts for over 40 percent of North Korea's entire external trade, according to South Korean government estimates. North Korea's trade with China expanded by 23 percent just last year, the South Korean government said.

Both United States and South Korean officials fear that although Beijing was disappointed by the North's continued tests, it remains reluctant to push too hard. They say China fears causing a collapse of the North Korean government that could flood it with refugees and create a newly unified, pro-American Korea on its border.

It remains to be seen whether Beijing or even Washington would have the stomach to enforce some of the proposed sanctions, such as interdicting North Korean ships. North Korea has proclaimed that it would regard any such search as an act of war.

"The sanctions will have a bite, but I'm not sure if it will be painful enough to change North Korean policy," said Wi Sung-lac, the Foreign Ministry's top negotiator with North Korea. "What we need on top of the sanctions is a united approach by the key players to enforce them."

In the end, what is needed to convince the North to give up its nuclear weapons, say many analysts and diplomats, is a "grand bargain" of sweeping incentives that could include large-scale economic aid, normalization of relations with the United States and pledges that Washington will not attack or topple the North Korean government.

"We need big enough carrots to go along with a stronger stick," said Yun Duk-min, a North Korea specialist at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, a government research institute. "That is the only hope for breaking out of this cycle."

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