

A Strategic Strangulation Campaign for North Korea: Is the International Community Ready for What May Come Next?



David S. Maxwell is the Associate Director of the Center for Security Studies in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He served in the US Army for 30 years retiring as a Special Forces Colonel.

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The United Nations Security Council passed what has been called the toughest sanctions regime ([UNSCR 2270](#)) against North Korea in response to its nuclear weapons program and the threat it poses to the Republic of Korea, Japan, the United States, and the international community. Has the UN and the international community, to include China and Russia, reached the breaking point over the behavior of Kim Jong-un and his threat to regional stability as well as the crimes against humanity being perpetrated against the 25 million Korean people in the north living under the yoke of brutal oppression that surpasses anything experienced in the 20th and 21st centuries from Hitler to Mao to Pol Pot? If so, is the international community ready for what comes next?

Kim Jong-un appears to be taking this seriously and has already responded; within hours after the UN Security Council approved the resolution the military [launched projectiles](#) into the East Sea. Kim Jong-un has stated that

he is now making his nuclear weapons [ready for use](#). As we have long known, he has no intention of giving up his nuclear weapons program as he believes it is key to his survival and to his ability to deter external threats. His directive to make his nuclear weapons ready is an apparent doubling down.

The sanctions regime has the potential to affect significantly the regime elite and the North Korean Peoples Army. From aviation fuel to Rolex watches to financial actions to having all shipping into and out of North Korea inspected for compliance, these sanctions may cause three major effects if they are actually enforced by the international community. First, the best case and desired objective is that the Kim Family Regime will change its behavior and become a responsible member of the international community. This is highly unlikely given the nature of the regime and past history. Second, and most likely and as we have already seen, it could cause a provocation response from North Korea. Third, and most dangerous and complex, if these sanctions are sustained over time is that internal instability could grow in Pyongyang as the military and the elite suffer and the regime is unable to provide the necessary resources for the military to sustain operations and the elite to maintain its standard of living.

These sanctions provide the foundation for what can be called a campaign of strategic strangulation that is focused on the regime elite and the military. China has worked to ensure that the sanctions do not affect the Korean people living in the north but remain targeted on what is known as the mafia-like crime family cult called the Kim Family Regime and its military. The question remains whether the international community will aggressively enforce the sanctions. Unfortunately, it is possible that some nations may not fully enforce the sanctions for fear of potential instability in North Korea and the ensuing fallout. For this campaign to successfully affect regime behavior all illicit activities by the regime must be stopped. From counterfeiting US hundred dollar bills, medicine, and cigarettes to drug trafficking to money laundering, nations around the world must enforce their laws and prevent North Korean diplomats from using their status to generate and transport hard currency to the regime. Intelligence and law enforcement action should focus on the illegal activities of North Korean diplomats, as this will reinforce the UN sanctions regime. Interestingly, [the Philippines is the first nation](#) to enforce UNSCR 2270 holding a North Korean ship in port, allowing UN inspectors to do their job, and announced that it will impound the ship and deport the crew.

It is likely that the regime will respond with the basic tactic of its decades old strategy, which is to conduct provocations to gain political and economic concessions. In addition to the launch of projectiles into the East Sea, we are likely to see continued nuclear testing and missile launches, potential naval action in the West Sea, and attacks along the Demilitarized Zone, among others, perhaps not immediately but over time as the sanctions continue. Although we have experienced all of these before, the regime can be expected to continually change tactics seeking vulnerabilities in the ROK/US military alliance while attempting to gain the initiative through provocation. However, the ROK military response to the [August 2015 provocations](#) illustrates the way to respond: decisive military response at the time and place of the provocation. The ROK response caused the regime to call for talks and the ROK was able to extract the concession of family reunions two months later.

The most dangerous outcome of the strategic strangulation campaign could be instability and regime collapse. As we developed the initial plans in the 1990's to prepare for this contingency we defined collapse as the loss of the ability of the Korean Workers Party to govern the entire territory of the north from Pyongyang, combined with the loss of coherency of the military and its support for the regime. If the elite and military cannot be well cared for by the regime, it is possible that there will be resistance from within the elite. Although we have identified myriad scenarios for implosion (defined as the effects contained within the north) and explosion (where the effects spill over to neighboring nations), due to the sophisticated and ruthless suppression mechanism it will be difficult for multiple members of the elite to conspire to resist Kim Jong-un.

Of course [North Korean "collapsists"](#) have been worried about regime collapse since the 1990's. Yet the regime has demonstrated incredible resiliency when faced with extreme conditions of famine, agricultural mismanagement appalling economic policies, and international isolation. One reason that it did not collapse is due to the [ROK Sunshine Policy](#) from 1997-2007 during which the ROK government provided extensive aid to the north without demands for reciprocation in the vain hope that this would moderate regime behavior. Furthermore, when faced with the modest sanctions of the past, the regime learned to circumvent them and developed methods that ensure access to hard currency and luxury goods so the regime can pursue its nuclear

and missile programs, support the military and ensure the loyalty of the elite.

Now the situation may be different. UNSCR 2207 may put pressure on the regime such that it has never had before. If the pressure is sustained over time, it could have serious effects on elite and military leaders that could have [catastrophic consequences](#) resulting in myriad instability scenarios.

The most plausible scenario that will cause immediate instability will be the lone wolf actor as postulated in Sungmin Cho's [important analysis](#). A lone wolf actor could bring about rapid change in the regime which leads to the very important question that the ROK, US, and the international community should consider: what do we do when we learn of the death of Kim Jong-un? This is the most extreme scenario that could result from a campaign of strategic strangulation and it is the most dangerous and complex. Again there are myriad scenarios that could surround the death of Kim because with no succession mechanism no one can be sure how a transition will occur. We could see a rapid progression through the [seven phases of regime collapse](#) as Robert Collins has postulated. Assuming that someone is able to step in and take immediate leadership in the seventh phase, what action should the ROK, the US, and the international community take in response? Have the leaders of the major powers thought this through and do they have contingency plans in place to deal with this eventuality? Does the ROK reach out to a new leader or does it wait and see what develops? Does the US reinforce the peninsula with forces to strengthen the ROK/US alliance in preparation for possible conflict resulting from explosion? Does China reach out and attempt to support a new leader?

While we hope that UNSCR 2270 will cause the regime to change its behavior we must plan for the worst case. Although we have long experience dealing with provocations, the question is whether the international community is prepared to react to the potential instability that could occur. The fear of this outcome has long paralyzed the international community but apparently North Korea has caused nations to decide that regime behavior can no longer be tolerated. This fear may also be what causes some members of the international community to perhaps not fully support the sanctions regime. However, a campaign of strategic strangulation must include preparation for the second and third order effects that could result. Have we thought this through?