North Korea – will he or won’t he

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ABSTRACT

Many analysts around the world have said they think Kim Jong-un is running a look-who’s-boss exercise, to make fellow North Koreans and foreign capitals take him seriously, as he follows in the footsteps of his warrior father, and threatens to rain fire on his enemies. As history has proven, ignoring or making fun of men in command of armies carries terrible risks, and so no one wants to make hasty judgements with Kim. Assessing the ultimate impact of the famine is impeded by the closed nature of the North Korean system, which forecloses access to official data and the normal channels of academic inquiry. Estimates of the death toll vary widely from the North Korean government’s quasi-official figure of 220,000 to an estimate of 3.5 million by the South Korean NGO Good Friends Center for Peace, Human Rights, and Refugees (Good Friends 2004). Lacking direct access to domestic residents, analysts are forced to project onto the entire population information derived from a limited and possibly unrepresentative sample of refugees. A team from the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health working from 771 refugee interviews carefully constructed mortality rates for what was by consensus the single worst affected province (North Hamgyong) and estimated that between nearly 12 percent of the province’s population had died.

Keywords: Democratic Republic of North Korea; Pyongyang; analysts
1. INTRODUCTION

Many analysts around the world have said they think Kim Jong-un is running a look-who’s-boss exercise, to make fellow North Koreans and foreign capitals take him seriously, as he follows in the footsteps of his warrior father, and threatens to rain fire on his enemies.

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Pyongyang has said it is in a state of war with South Korea; but that state dates from the Korean war in the 1950s. Technically, the conflict never ended; there is still no peace treaty. Then, in the 1970s the North started developing missiles, to supplement its more than one million-man army.

It has an arsenal now, including medium-to-long range weapons: the Nodong, the Taepodongs and the Musudan. The farthest-reaching could strike Alaska, 6,000 kilometres away, according to experts. And US bases in the Pacific Ocean, such as Okinawa, are also potentially at risk. The reliability and extent of this arsenal raises ominous questions.

Some of Pyongyang’s weaponry does not seem to have been tested. Some of it has, and it was a failure, like the Taepodong II. But in numbers, of varying range, North Korea is thought to have at least 1,000 war missiles.

Democratic Republic of North Korea

- Supreme Leader: Kim Jong-un  
  (17 December 2011 – Incumbent)  
  World’s youngest head of state
- Independent since 1948  
  (after Korea war and 3 years of Sovietic rule)
- Area: 120.408 km2
- Population: 24,720,407  
  (estimation July 2013)
- Life expectancy: 69 years
- GDP: $40 billion (2010 est.)

North Korea is well into its second decade of chronic food shortages. A famine in the 1990s killed as many as one million North Koreans or roughly five percent of the population. North Korean claims that the famine was due primarily to natural disasters and external shocks are misleading in important respects.

The decline in food production and the deterioration of the public distribution system (PDS) were visible years before the floods of 1995. Moreover, the government was culpably slow to take the necessary steps to guarantee adequate food supplies. With plausible policy adjustments—such as maintaining food imports on commercial terms or aggressively seeking multilateral assistance—the government could have avoided the famine and the shortages that continue to plague the country. Instead, the regime blocked humanitarian aid to the hardest hit parts of the country during the peak of the famine and curtailed commercial imports of food once humanitarian assistance began.

Coping responses by households during the famine contributed to a bottom-up marketization of the economy, ratified by the economic policy changes introduced by the North Korean government in 2002.
What began as a socialist famine arising out of failed agricultural policies and a misguided emphasis on food self-sufficiency has evolved into a chronic food emergency more akin to those observed in market and transition economies. Incomplete reforms have not solved the problem of declining food production and have given rise to a large food-insecure population among the urban non-elite.

The world community has responded to this tragedy with considerable generosity, committing more than $2 billion in food aid to the country over the past decade. The United States has contributed more than $600 million, equivalent to 2 million metric tons of grain. Yet at virtually every point, the North Korean government has placed roadblocks in the way of the donor community, and more than 10 years into this process, the relief effort remains woefully below international standards in terms of transparency and effectiveness. Up to half of aid deliveries do not reach their intended recipients. Due to these programmatic problems, diplomatic conflicts, and competing needs elsewhere in the world, patience with North Korea has waned among some major donors.

In recent years, aid through the World Food Programme (WFP), the principle channel for delivering multilateral assistance, has consistently fallen short of its targets. At the same time, North Korea has been able to partly, if not fully, compensate for these shortfalls through generous assistance from South Korea and China. The bilateral assistance from these countries is weakly monitored, if conditional at all, and thus undercuts the ability of the WFP and other donors to negotiate improvements in the transparency, and ultimately, effectiveness, of multilateral assistance.

These problems cannot be separated from the underlying political situation in the country; it is misguided to separate the humanitarian and human rights discourses. North Korea would have faced difficulties in the 1990s regardless of its regime type. But it is difficult to imagine a famine of this magnitude, or chronic food shortages of this duration, occurring in a regime that protected basic political and civil liberties.

The notion of famine conjures up disturbing images of emaciated people and wasting, listless children. Confronted with the devastating impact of inadequate caloric intake on the human body, one’s understandable impulse is to think of famine in terms of physical shortages of food supplies. Yet in the contemporary world, the sources of food insecurity increasingly can be traced not to natural causes but to human ones. Today there is no reason for anyone to starve as a result of weather conditions, food shortages, or even failures in distribution. Global food supplies are adequate. Information on weather patterns and crop conditions is now readily available, providing an effective early warning system of potential shortfalls and crises.

Global markets for basic grains are well developed and highly integrated and the world community has developed a well-institutionalized system of humanitarian assistance. A series of international covenants have made explicit the commitment to a world without hunger. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrined the right to adequate food. The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) elaborated this commitment as “the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger.” At the 1996 World Food Summit, official delegations from 185 countries, including representatives from the governments of the United States and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (the DPRK or North Korea), reaffirmed “the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free of hunger.”1 When initially articulated, these rights looked more like pious wishes than
achievable objectives. But an effective set of global institutions is now capable of making these political commitments viable by soliciting food contributions and delivering emergency assistance to populations facing distress from natural disasters and economic dislocation. With effective institutions and adequate physical supplies, the occurrence of famine increasingly signals not the lack of food or capacity, but some fundamental political or governance failure. Natural conditions are no longer our primary adversaries: humans are. The case of North Korea, where a chronic food emergency is well into its second decade, is an egregious example of this phenomenon.

Although estimates vary widely, a famine in the mid-1990s killed as many as one million North Koreans, or roughly five percent of the population. Millions more were left to contend with broken lives and personal misery. Particularly worrisome are the long-term effects—including irreversible ones—on the human development of infants and children. Conditions in North Korea today are less tenuous than during the worst of the famine, thanks in part to humanitarian assistance from the world community. Yet despite this assistance, millions of North Koreans remain chronically food insecure.

When the food crisis began, access to food came through a public distribution system (PDS) controlled by the regime and entitlements were partly a function of political status. As the socialist economy crumbled and markets developed in response to the state’s inability to fulfill its obligations under the old social compact, the character of the crisis changed. Current shortages bear closer resemblance to food emergencies in market and transition economies, where access to food is determined by one’s capacity to command resources in the marketplace. This type of emergency is no less severe, but poses different challenges to outside donors.

Assessing the ultimate impact of the famine is impeded by the closed nature of the North Korean system, which forecloses access to official data and the normal channels of academic inquiry. Estimates of the death toll vary widely from the North Korean government’s quasi-official figure of 220,000 to an estimate of 3.5 million by the South Korean NGO Good Friends Center for Peace, Human Rights, and Refugees (Good Friends 2004).

Lacking direct access to domestic residents, analysts are forced to project onto the entire population information derived from a limited and possibly unrepresentative sample of refugees. A team from the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health working from 771 refugee interviews carefully constructed mortality rates for what was by consensus the single worst affected province (North Hamgyong) and estimated that between nearly 12 percent of the province’s population had died (Robinson et al. 1999).

Extrapolating this mortality rate to the whole country (something the Johns Hopkins team is careful not to do) would yield an estimate of more than 2.6 million deaths, which is almost certainly too high. More recently, two groups of analysts working independently (indeed, unbeknownst to each other) using somewhat different data and more sophisticated methodologies have come to remarkably similar estimates that seem more plausible.

These studies suggest between 600,000 and 1 million excess deaths, or roughly 3–5 percent of the precrisis population (Goodkind and West 2000, Lee 2003). As in other famines, most of these excess deaths were not due to starvation per se. As caloric intake falls, immune systems weaken and people typically succumb to diseases such as tuberculosis before starving to death; both the young and the old are particularly vulnerable in this regard.
Even with these reduced estimates of fatalities, the North Korean famine ranks as one of the most devastating of the century and certainly the worst of the last twenty years. Moreover, these estimates do not consider births foregone through miscarriages, stillbirths, and reduced incidence of conception, which typically account for a significant component of the demographic impact of famine. Nor do they capture long-term developmental damage to survivors, and particularly to infants suffering from poor prenatal and perinatal nutrition.

Map 1. North Korea compared to other countries.
To recap, the food situation in North Korea began to deteriorate in the early 1990s, as the government proved unable or unwilling to manage the external shocks associated with the changing terms of Soviet and Chinese trade, the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, and the collapse of the Russian and Eastern European economies (which had also been mainstays of support). Mortality rates were rising by 1994, if not earlier. By the spring of 1995 the situation had grown sufficiently desperate that the government approached first Japan, then South Korea, to obtain emergency assistance that was granted. In the summer, the country was hit by floods.

This chronology is important: the worsening food situation and the onset of famine preceded the natural disasters that were real, but of secondary importance.

After nearly a decade of relief efforts, North Korean practices still fall well below international norms with respect to transparency and non-discrimination in the distribution of humanitarian relief. During the postwar period, the public humanitarian relief system centered on the UN agencies, particularly on the WFP, which has developed a well-articulated set of norms governing the implementation of relief operations.

At the core of these norms are principles of non-discrimination and distribution based on need: “priority in food aid should be given to the most vulnerable populations” and “such aid should be based on the needs of the intended beneficiaries.” The notion of non-discrimination is defined with respect to age, gender, social status, ethnicity, and political beliefs (Ziegler 2002).
These basic norms, as well as basic principles of accountability within donor countries, drive the related insistence on thorough monitoring of aid, which is codified in the WFP handbook in a standard operating procedure embodying reciprocal obligations on the parts of donors and recipients.

There have been parallel attempts to codify norms within the NGO community, including prior understanding of basic conditions; evaluation of effectiveness; participation by recipients in the design, management, and monitoring of programs; distribution of aid through a transparent system that can be monitored and adequately audited; and impartiality or the distribution of aid in a fair and equitable manner (Sphere 2004). The desire to articulate clear norms among the humanitarian community is not simply an exercise in idealism; it is also designed to solve a particular set of incentive problems that can emerge in any humanitarian operation. In the absence of normative constraints, the differences among donors and competition among them can lead to a “race to the bottom”: a willingness to turn a blind eye toward diversion; a tendency to exaggerate aid effectiveness; and even the empowerment of groups who bear responsibility for causing the humanitarian crisis in the first place.

This type of diversion is no doubt real, but almost certainly exaggerated. Much less attention has been given to the effect of the huge difference between controlled and market prices on the incentive to divert food for economic reasons: to sell it in the market. These incentives operate with respect to farmers—who can earn more by selling to the market than surrendering grain to the state—and they almost certainly operate with respect to aid as well. Local military and political officials and those involved in the transport of grain have strong incentives to divert aid to non-deserving groups or to the market.

Since its early operations in the country, the WFP has sought to address this problem through two means: (1) devising lists of target groups, and (2) selective monitoring of the institutions and programs—such as food-for-work programs—through which aid is delivered to recipients. Public distribution centers (PDCs) are the main channel for the delivery of food to the general, non-targeted population. These centers can be thought of as final “retail” outlets, where households purchase prescribed amounts of food using ration cards. The primary channel for delivering food to targeted groups is via more than 40,000 institutions such as schools, orphanages, and hospitals.

However, there is no separate channel in North Korea for distributing food to these institutions; food passes through the same county-level PDS warehouse before it is distributed to the final units. These county-level warehouses are controlled by People’s Committees made up of mid-level government and party officials.

These groups confront multiple demands on the food they control, from central authorities wishing to reallocate the food regionally, to local military and work units, to outright corruption.

Addressing the problem of diversion is particularly difficult in North Korea because even the most basic international norms are not observed. In essence, there exists a fundamental lack of trust between the government of North Korea and the international donor community. Indicative of this stance is the fact that Jean Ziegler, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, has been denied entry to North Korea five times, despite the fact that UN programs have been feeding nearly one-third of the population on an ongoing basis.

Once a program is initiated, North Korean practices make it impossible for the WFP or non-resident NGOs working through its Food Aid Liaison Unit (FALU) to track relief shipments from port to recipient.
The opportunities for leakage in such a system are multiple. Typically the WFP and NGOs rely on a paper trail of transport waybills and transaction receipts at local PDCs to track supplies. Major diversion at the port is unlikely, but much food does not go from port to truck but rather to trains and barges before it is transferred to trucks; these shipments are not tracked. Relief officials have at times expressed the view that these records were fabricated, though whether this was done to hide diversion or as the result of simple lack of administrative capacity is unclear.

There have also been a number of eyewitness accounts by foreigners, as well as refugee and defector testimonies to outright diversion by military units, though whether this was part of a centrally directed conspiracy or simply opportunistic behavior by local commanders is also unknown. Once food reaches the county warehouse, the only check on delivery to the final institutional destinations—whether PDCs or targeted institutions—and on the use made of the food by those final destinations is through spot checks by WFP sub-offices.

Although large-scale diversion at higher stages in the distribution chain is possible, it is at this lower level that monitoring is necessarily the weakest and diversion thus most likely to occur.
The magnitude of the task of tracking supplies across tens of thousands of end-user institutions under abysmal working conditions should not be underestimated. 

Ironically, some NGOs, operating on a vastly smaller scale may actually have a more accurate grasp of where their contributions are ending up, despite the fact that they undertake less rigorous monitoring. The behavior of these county-level institutions is difficult to characterize, but numerous accounts provide revealing information on what are certainly larger patterns.

Dammers, Fox, and Jimenez (2005) reported on an EU-funded UNICEF program that distributes therapeutic milk, a product that can be fatal if administered incorrectly. According to the 2003/2004 agreement, the milk was to be provided to three provincial hospitals with properly-trained staff.

However during a monitoring visit in November 2003, the EU’s technical assistant discovered that the supplies were being distributed to baby-homes in the cities of Hyesan and Chongjin.

The North Korean government then proposed for the 2004/2005 cycle that the product be distributed to 157 rehabilitation centers of various sorts, an alteration in terms of reference that Dammers, Fox, and Jimenez describe as without justification, costineffective, and potentially dangerous. These diverted supplies did not disappear into the ether: they were consumed, but not by the intended beneficiaries.

2. CONCLUSIONS

The inability of the state to provide food led to grass-roots marketization of the economy as small-scale social units engaged in entrepreneurial coping behavior to access food, a development that ultimately resulted in the alteration of basic social relations. Subsequent North Korean economic policy changes are best understood as reactive responses to this bottom-up process, an effort to regain control over a fraying social economy rather than to liberalize.

Although the approach we take to these issues in Famine in North Korea is largely empirical, the argument is nested in a broader approach to famine pioneered by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen.

The core insight of Sen’s work on famine is that the provision of food is never simply the result of purely economic factors, agronomic conditions, or exogenous shocks such as drought or floods. Rather, the availability of food reflects a more deeply structured set of social relations that either guarantee or fail to guarantee sustenance. In socialist countries, these entitlements are rooted neither in the distribution of private property nor in the market but in the public distribution system (PDS) through which the bulk of food—and virtually all food for urban residents—ultimately passes. Sen does not contend that authoritarian regimes will inevitably generate famine.

Neither does he—or do we—argue that authoritarian governments will ignore distress when it comes to their attention or deliberately starve their people. Sen does maintain, however, that governments that are not accountable to their citizens are lacking in both the information and the incentives to respond effectively to severe distress when it arises. There is little doubt in our minds that the North Korean case vindicates this simple point in a powerful way.
Reference


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