



Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures  
Polish Academy of Sciences



ACTA ASIATICA  
VARSOVIENSIA  
No. 32

Warsaw 2019

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*Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia no. 32 was granted a financial support of the  
Ministry of Science and Higher Education, grant no. 709/P-DUN/2019*

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PL ISSN 0860–6102

eISSN 2449–8653

ISBN 978–83–7452–091–1

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## Parallel development and humanitarian crisis in North Korea, a case of extremes

### Abstract

North Korea often tries to hide the results of decades of communist authoritarian leadership and economic mismanagement. The military-first policy has caused a lack of economic development and half of the population is living in miserable conditions, suffering an acute humanitarian crisis. The UN has called for urgent aid, but to avoid it from being diverted into the military sector and the elite, it should be channeled directly to the vulnerable population and flow independently of the denuclearisation talks. There is a need of active diplomacy, international cooperation and engagement to enhance the standard of living of the North Korean people.

**Keywords:** *Byungjin* policy, humanitarian assistance, humanitarian crisis, North Korea, parallel development.

### Introduction

North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) effectively closed itself to the outside world when Kim Il-sung took control after World War II.<sup>2</sup> Under its leadership, a military-first policy, *Songun*, was introduced in the country and it was intensified during the Kim Jong-il government. It guides political and economic life in North Korea and controls the allocation of resources. It gives priority to the military and elites over the general population, plays a major role in the implementation of foreign policy and maintains a fiercely defensive posture to outside forces. The *Juche* doctrine was also introduced as the official state ideology, based on the self-reliance of the regime. It permeates every aspect of North Korean life and is firmly rooted in the ideals of sustainability and a lack of dependency.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout these decades of military-first policy, there has been a disproportionately high spending on armaments and on the development of a nuclear programme as an instrument of pressure in negotiations with the international

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1 Degree in East Asian Studies from the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) and Master's Degree in Contemporary China and International Relations. Specialist in North Korean Issues. Member of the Observatory of Chinese Politics Community.

2 The country remains outside most international or regional forums, as well as outside the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

3 French 2015: Part 1: 2

community.<sup>4</sup> On October 9, 2006 the DPRK announced it had successfully conducted its first test of a nuclear weapon. Chairman Kim Jong-il calculated that a nuclear-armed North Korea could better induce the United States (US) to direct bilateral negotiations. However, this test led to the adoption of the United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1718, aimed at punishing North Korea through economic sanctions, and was rejected by the DPRK.<sup>5</sup> This chain of events has been repeated over the years<sup>6</sup> and the negotiations for the dismantling of the North Korean nuclear programme has become faced multi-ple obstacles. Despite efforts, the country has continued with the development of its programme to become a *de facto* nuclear state.<sup>7</sup>

Since Kim Jong-un came to power at the end of 2011 the same strategy of promoting a nuclear programme has been continued, although in 2013 North Korea adopted the *Byungjin* policy, or parallel development, both military and economic, as a new strategic policy guideline to maximise economic development and the standard of living of the population.<sup>8</sup>

North Korea has always tried to hide the results of decades of communist authoritarian leadership and economic mismanagement, but the military-first policy has led to a lack of economic development and half of the population is living in miserable conditions. The launchings throughout the years 2016 and 2017 of numerous ballistic missiles, some of them long range and able to reach the US, and several nuclear tests, including a hydrogen bomb, have led to the imposition of multiple sanctions by the UN Security Council.<sup>9</sup> The “maximum pressure” campaign against North Korea enabled by president Trump seems to be achieving its objective, harming the country through preventing its economic development, a pillar of the *Byungjin* policy.<sup>10</sup>

Kim Jong-un is aware that economic recovery is fundamental to legitimise himself in power, as he is committed to implementing his promise of

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4 North Korea is pursuing the nuclear programme, either to hedge against the uncertainties surrounding Pyongyang’s future or to deter a plausible US pre-emption. It has been blocking the progress of peace and prosperity policy in the region. Northeast Asian countries, except the DPRK, have had remarkable economic growth. As security interests grow with growing national wealth, security as a viable concept becomes more compelling. See Han 2007

5 Joo, Kwak 2007: 2–13.

6 A list of resolutions and sanctions imposed to North Korea can be seen at the UN Security Council web site: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/dprk-north-korea/> Revere 2010.

7 Cheon 2013; Kang, Cha 2018.

9 Sanctions, once applied, are not easy to lift since it requires unanimous acceptance by the five permanent members of the Security Council of the UN (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and United States). See: Lankov 2019.

10 Reiss Waldron 2018.

development.<sup>11</sup> Probably this is the reason why since early 2018, once the ballistic and nuclear tests considered necessary for its nuclear programme had been completed, he started a diplomatic strategy of approaching the US, China, South Korea and Russia. However, until now, it has not given the desired results, the lifting of sanctions imposed in 2016 and 2017.<sup>12</sup>

The critical situation of the country's most vulnerable people has led us to carry out this analysis of the current situation in North Korea, particularly after Kim Jong-un came to power and the *Byungjin* policy was adopted. One can raise the question as to whether the "maximum pressure" campaign against North Korea is affecting the deep humanitarian crisis that the country is going through and if the lifting of sanctions would change Pyongyang's strategy and release resources that could be used to improve access to food and healthcare for the people of North Korea. To answer it, we undertake an investigation based on the study of articles, books, official documents and news. We will first provide an overview of the *Byungjin* policy and will continue with an analysis of North Korean regime expenditure in its economic growth, followed by an outlook of the humanitarian situation as a contrast. It will be a descriptive and explanatory investigation aimed at drawing attention to the real human situation, in an attempt to contribute to find solutions to alleviate it.

### **An overview on the *Byungjin* policy**

On March 31st, 2013, North Korea adopted the *Byungjin* (parallel development) policy of 'economy and nuclear weapons' during a plenary session of the Party Central Committee. Kim Jong-un called the *Byungjin* policy a new strategic policy guideline 'essential given the current world order' and stressed that it was crucial for the construction of a strong and prosperous nation. By making economic development a key element of state ideology, Kim has signalled a break from the past.<sup>13</sup> As detailed by Cheon Seong-Whum,<sup>14</sup> the North Korean leader laid out its meanings as follows:<sup>15</sup>

- A deepening and improvement of the inherited policy of 'economic and national defence capability'.
- A strategic guideline for the construction of a 'strong and prosperous nation

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11 Kang, Cha 2018.

12 Rodrigo 2019.

13 Kang, Cha 2018.

14 Cheon Seong-Whum, Director of the Center for the North Korean Studies at the Institute for National Unification (KINU) in 2013. See: Cheon S-W 2013.

15 See the Concluding Speech of Kim Jong-un at the March 2013 Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Worker's Party of Korea [https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kju\\_march2013\\_speech.pdf/file\\_view](https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kju_march2013_speech.pdf/file_view) (Accessed: 5 July 2019).

- where the people can enjoy the wealth and splendour of socialism' through strengthening defensive capacity and focusing on economic construction.
- A precious sword that will advance 'the construction of a socialist strong and prosperous nation and Korean unification' and a 'banner' of safeguarding the autonomy and dignity of the people.
  - A realisation of the firm belief and will of the Party to accomplish the 'revolutionary cause of Juche through a path of self-reliance, military-first, and socialism'.
  - A pragmatic guideline to maximise the efficiency of economic development and strengthen national defence 'in accordance with the state of affairs'.
  - A measure to promote economic construction and raise living standards of the people while strengthening national defence capabilities 'without increasing the defence budget'.
  - A rational guideline towards solving energy problems based on an 'independent nuclear energy industry while strengthening nuclear weapons capabilities' at the same time.

The plenary session laid out several measures to carry out the *Byungjin* policy and insisted on working towards preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, to secure the peace and stability of Asia and the world, and to realise global denuclearisation as a responsible nuclear weapons state. North Korea would no longer differentiate its nuclear energy for peaceful use from military use. That does not symbolise peaceful use or military use as two separate entities, but rather one enhancing both its economic and military capabilities by using so-called 'dual use technologies' that can have both civilian and military applications. The message was that while North Korea would never give up its nuclear weapons, it intended to use nuclear weapons for defensive purposes only and to manage them with maximum safety.

### **The North Korean regime's expenditure in economic growth**

Since Kim Jong-un came to power and after the adoption of the *Byungjin* policy, North Korea has been able to make some economic progress, despite being subjected to severe sanctions by the UN Security Council. Pyongyang has regularised bureaucratic processes and instituted reforms to expand the scope of the private economy.<sup>16</sup> Its total trade continued to increase to a peak in 2014, when it reached 10 billion dollars, with China its largest trading partner, followed by South Korea. Foreign direct investment reached a maximum of 227

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<sup>16</sup> Kang, Cha 2018.

million dollars in 2013.<sup>17</sup> Because of the regime's secrecy, reliable economic data is scarce, although it seems that the nascent market forces are beginning to remodel North Korea. Economists estimate the North Korean economy has grown 1.24 per cent on average since Kim Jong-un took power, expanding by 4 per cent in 2016, the fastest growth in 17 years.<sup>18</sup> The annual GDP per capita is \$1,800, making it 197th in the world and only 2 percent of South Korea's. That cannot be considered miracle growth, but according to these data, the DPRK is now better than before.<sup>19</sup>

North Korea now is not the same as it was fifteen years ago; its political institutions, economy and society have all experienced major and possibly enduring changes. The economic development has been driven by domestic policy decisions, thanks to better economic frameworks and a greater space for private production and trade. The regime has also developed alternative channels to improve its trade and other transactions to circumvent sanctions that are not well known, but that play a significant role for its economy. All these actions have probably stopped the total collapse of the economy.<sup>20</sup>

The North Korean economy is still theoretically run under a centrally controlled and state-planned system that directs economic life from top to bottom. For decades, the regime used a Public Distribution System (PDS) to provide people with food and basic necessities. However, after the devastating country-wide famine in the 1990s and the end of external support from the Soviet Union, the PDS system collapsed and the North Korean people turned to trading in informal black markets and exchanging goods to survive.<sup>21</sup>

According to The Heritage Foundation (2018), almost all the property belongs to the state and there is no functional, modern and independent judiciary. Bribery is widespread and corruption is endemic at all levels of the state and the economy. Kim Jong-un has cracked down on smuggling and on foreign media sales on the country's markets, but also institutionalised the market system and allowed it to expand.<sup>22</sup> His commitment to the *Byungjin* policy has led him to a limited acceptance of market forces. Dozens of markets have opened in cities across the country and a growing class of merchants and businessmen, the *Donju*, is thriving under the protection of the ruling party's officials.<sup>23</sup> Much

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17 Silberstein 2019.

18 Carney 2018; Choe 2017.

19 Parker 2018.

20 Kang, Cha 2018: Chapter 7; Silberstein 2019; Smith 2015: Chapter 11.

21 Cha and Collins 2018; Kang, Cha 2018: Chapter 7; French 2015: Part III; Smith 2015: Chapter 7.

22 Silberstein 2019.

23 Rodrigo 2018.

of this activity is done through officially registered marketplaces but a lot of trade falls in a gray zone of quasi-illegal or unofficial trade and a considerable amount of market activity remains illegal and suppressed.<sup>24</sup>

According to data, there are at least 436 officially sanctioned markets across the country located in rural and urban areas, deeply integrated into both the economy and society. Their number and geographic distribution indicate that they have become an institutionalised part of North Korean society.<sup>25</sup> These markets, the *Jangmadan*, germinated in the 1990s, are now one of the major channels of distribution and have become a critical value chain that can lead the country's economy to potential prosperity.<sup>26</sup>

As North Korea's biggest trading partner and only ally, China has expressed support for Kim's change in national policy, and official exchanges have increased since Kim's first meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing last year.<sup>27</sup> Busy trade on the border between the two countries supports the growth of the *Jangmadang* which has significantly impacted social, political, and economic conditions inside the country and therefore, has improved the quality of life of North Korean people. The government, from time to time, also cracks down on these markets to repress their activity or enforce policies to stifle their growth.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout these years, there has been a construction boom in Pyongyang and multi-story apartment buildings standing in rows along impossibly broad streets can be seen.<sup>29</sup> Now there are many vehicles and electric bikes from China and Japan on its once empty streets.<sup>30</sup> To the upper classes and those who can pay, the city affords a measure of material comfort, despite the recent tightening of sanctions. The Pyongyang restaurant scene is nowadays large and varied.<sup>31</sup> Only those considered loyal to the regime are allowed to live in the capital. Life outside is far worse; electricity and proper plumbing are rarities. Most homes are heated by open fireplaces, and many have no flush toilets.<sup>32</sup>

In Pyongyang, people buy smartphones, Tablets and high definition TVs and, despite a deficient service, there are now 1.5 million mobile phone users. North Korean smartphones have similar capacities to those in other countries

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24 Grover 2019; Kang, Cha 2018.

25 Cha, Collins 2018.

26 Choe 2019; Grover 2019.

27 Zhou 2018.

28 Cha, Collins 2018.

29 French 2015: Part I; Lankov 2013: Chapter 3; 2015: Chapter 5.

30 Choe 2017.

31 Lankov 2013: Chapter 2; 2015: Chapter 3; The Economist 2018.

32 French 2015: Part I; Parker 2018.

but, in place of the internet, citizens use a state-controlled intranet and there are North Korean versions of Google, Facebook or chat rooms.<sup>33</sup>

In his new economic policy, Kim Jong-un has granted state factories more autonomy over their production, including the authority to find their own suppliers and customers, as long as they meet a state quota. Likewise, Pyongyang has now assigned farmers to a set amount of land called *pojeon* and allows them to keep anything they produce that is above their government-set quota.<sup>34</sup> This incentive has led to greater production as farmers keep up to 70 per cent of their harvest<sup>35</sup>, similar to the Chinese style reforms of the 1980s. But North Korea has a logic of its own, so the regime has refrained from describing them as market-oriented reforms, preferring the phrase “economic management in our own style”.<sup>36</sup>

There is a high budget dedicated to the Pyongyang underground and to big department stores reform. Access to high-end luxury goods for North Korean elites continues to grow, including products which some UN member states have determined constitute sanctioned luxury goods.<sup>37</sup> Increasingly cheap solar panels are giving a boost to consumer consumption and industry as Pyongyang tries to limit the impact of the tough international sanctions. Electricity is unreliable, shortages have always been a concern for North Korea, and Kim Jong-un has called for greater use of renewable energy as part of his drive for self-sufficiency, so private use of solar panels has gone from being officially banned, to tolerated, to encouraged by the government.<sup>38</sup>

But as private enterprise is allowed to expand, the central argument of the government based on socialist superiority over the capitalist system is undermined. There are signs showing that market forces are weakening government control over society. As people sustain themselves and get what they need out of the state economy, they are less committed to, and more disappointed with the authorities.<sup>39</sup> The young North Koreans, the “*Jangmadang* Generation”, grew up audacious as a result of the famine, so they are very different from their elders, they love luxury, are less respectful to established authority and have emerged as the greatest force for change that North Korea has ever seen.<sup>40</sup>

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33 Parker 2018.

34 Choe 2017.

35 Grover 2019.

36 Carney 2018; Silberstein 2019; Smith 2015: Chapter 5.

37 Zwirko 2019.

38 Shin 2019.

39 Choe 2017; Corrado 2017; Smith 2015: Chapter 10.

40 Fifield 2017b; Lankov 2015: Chapter 10.

## Humanitarian situation

North Korea often tries to hide from the world the results of decades of communist authoritarian leadership and economic mismanagement. The consequences of the regime's military-first policy have been devastating on a human level. The disproportionate high expenses on armament has caused a lack of economic development in the country where half of the population lives in miserable conditions and is suffering an acute humanitarian crisis.<sup>41</sup> On the 1990s, North Korea suffered a horrific famine, during which the PDS collapsed, the economy shrank by a third and up to five per cent of the population died.<sup>42</sup> Since then, and according to The World Bank, life expectancy at birth has increased from 64,493 years at its lowest point in 1998, to 71,887 in 2017.<sup>43</sup>

However, for nearly three decades a chronic food shortage has affected North Korea and Kim Jong-un does not want another crisis to be repeated. He knows marketisation is needed to avoid it, but he doesn't want to allow in ideas that would cause North Koreans to be further dissatisfied with their lives and lose power.<sup>44</sup> That's why he is attempting a delicate balance in reforms, something scholars have termed "decentralised socialism" or "marketisation without liberalisation.". The elite ruling class enjoys the benefits of modern life and the middle class receives enough food and occasional new clothes. For everyone else, daily living is harsh and severe micro-famines still occur, most people must struggle to survive; for them meat is an unaffordable luxury and they subsist on fermented cabbage, rice, corn and porridge. Half of the nation's 24 million people live in extreme poverty.<sup>45</sup>

Humanitarian activities by the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and private relief groups constitute the longest ongoing engagement between the DPRK and the international community. The UN Development Program (UNDP) has recently published the annual report on the North Korea Needs and Priorities Plan for the year 2019.<sup>46</sup> An estimated 11 million people in the DPRK, out of a total population of approximately 25 million, lack enough food, potable water or access to basic services such as health and sanitation, with women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities most vulnerable. According to this report, the number of targeted people to receive any kind of humanitarian assistance during 2018 was 6 million, though the number of

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41 UNDP 2019.

42 Reiss, Waldron 2018.

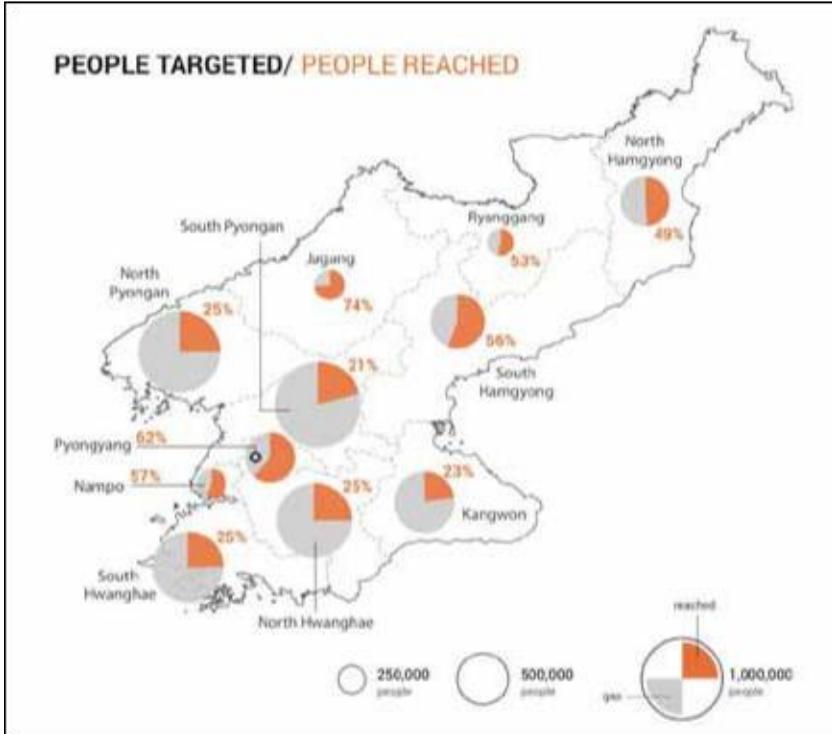
43 See The World Bank at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=KP> (Accessed 30 June 2019).

44 Smith 2015: Chapter 10.

45 Parker 2018.

46 UNDP 2019.

people reached has been only 2 million (Figure 1). However, in many cases the full package of required assistance per person was not provided due to insufficient funding.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of people reached for humanitarian assistance in the different provinces with respect to the total people targeted<sup>47</sup>

Generalised malnutrition threatens an entire generation of children, with one in five suffering from delays in their development due to chronic malnutrition. Stunting of that degree at that age is irrecoverable and confers a lifetime of physical and mental challenges. Children are also at risk of dying from diseases that are perfectly curable or avoidable in other conditions. The UN, therefore, has made a call to urgently provide aid of 120 million US dollars that is considered vitally important for 3.8 million people who need humanitarian assistance.

<sup>47</sup> UNDP 2019.

Tuberculosis and malaria are two of North Korea's major public health problems and have been the focus of the country's health policy since the 2000s.<sup>48</sup> Their prevalence has decreased over the years but, now they are being affected by Trump's "maximum pressure" policy, which is keeping lifesaving medicines and supplies away from thousands of patients. To help North Korea control this problem, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, has given more than \$100 million in grants since 2010. However, the Global Fund has ended all its North Korea-related grants, a situation that is going to harm the peninsula for generations.<sup>49</sup>

After decades of poor agricultural practices and despite Kim Jong-un's commitment to the country's economic development, the lack of adequate investments has contributed to decreased agricultural production. Agriculture in North Korea has inherent problems because it is a very mountainous country and arable land is insufficient. As cited in the memorandum of the UNDP, other causes of food shortages in the DPRK are natural disasters such as high temperatures, droughts and heavy rains.<sup>50</sup>

North Korea still does not produce enough food to feed itself. It is worrying that total food production in 2018 was more than 9% lower than in 2017 and has been the lowest production in more than a decade.<sup>51</sup> Pyongyang has warned that it is facing a food shortfall of some 1.4 million tons in 2019 and has been forced to almost halve rations, blaming high temperatures, drought, floods and UN sanctions. The UN annual report claims that North Korea's food production last year was 4.951 million tons, 503,000 tons down on 2017, including rice, wheat, potatoes and soybeans. North Korea said it would import 200,000 tons of food and produce about 400,000 tons of early crops, but that it would still be left with a gap and from January would cut daily rations to 300 grams per person from 550 grams.<sup>52</sup> This has opened the door to a possible deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the DPRK and the increase of malnutrition and diseases.

Therefore, despite natural disasters and climatic difficulties, an inadequate response to deal with these problems has been evident. Pyongyang, throughout these years, has not carried out adequate investment in agricultural infrastructure and necessary supplies, and has failed in its obligation to improve the living conditions of the weakest.<sup>53</sup>

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48 Smith 2015: Chapter 11.

49 Talmadge 2018.

50 King 2019.

51 UNDP 2019.

52 Nichols 2019.

53 King 2019.

North Korea has declared that sanctions are affecting access to the food imports its population urgently needs. However, there are experts who consider this is not a valid statement since the sanction's regime focuses on limiting Pyongyang's access to the goods and funds needed to improve its military capabilities and the export to North Korea of luxury goods.<sup>54</sup> It could not even be considered that the sanctions on oil products would have any impact on agricultural production since the level of mechanisation is very low and agricultural technology remains primitive.<sup>55</sup>

As reported by the Associated Press (2019), after the UN's call to provide urgent aid to the North, South Korea started to move quickly on plans to provide \$8 million worth of medical and nutritional aid for North Korean children through the UN. The government wants to discuss its plans with the WFP and the United Nations Children's Fund, through which the aid would be provided, to reach children and pregnant women quickly.

Much of the foreign aid to North Korea has been diverted into the military sector or used to retain the loyalty of the elite<sup>56</sup> and wasted in various ineffective governmental development programmes that would only benefit a few.<sup>57</sup> It is therefore important to press North Korea for strengthened monitoring and to link aid to long term reforms designed to achieve sustainable results. There is donor fatigue; aid to North Korea has been going on for a long time, so voices are being raised about ending it.<sup>58</sup> However, the vulnerable population remain; they are the most direct victims of the regime, and we know from nutritional data that lack of good food in early years means that many will be permanently affected. The WFP should be helped to continue its North Korean programme. To attract donors, North Korea will need to devote more of its own resources to agricultural reforms, incentives for food production, ending market restrictions, and improving its health structures.

Providing aid may inadvertently help the very regime that keeps its own people hungry. Under the political context of failed politics, it is highly likely that the developmental impact of aid is severely limited and demonstrates the state's failure to provide for the basic needs of the people. There has been no movement on Pyongyang's side, suggesting that the lifting of sanctions would change the country's strategy and release resources that could be used to improve access to food and healthcare for the most vulnerable population.

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54 King 2019.

55 The Economist 2018.

56 French 2015: Part IV:13.

57 Kim 2014.

58 The Guardian 2014.

Moreover, the “maximum pressure” campaign against the country seems to be stopping the urgent delivery of the needed humanitarian aid. Humanitarian action should, thus, flow through direct channels, independent from the sanction’s regime by means of specialised agencies, to avoid the government funnelling money into its nuclear and missile programme.<sup>59</sup> Only through active diplomacy, dialogue and international cooperation, can approaches that enhance the standard of living of the North Korean people be developed.

In addition to the humanitarian crisis and, according to the UN<sup>60</sup>, North Koreans live under systematic and widespread human rights violations. When Kim Jong-un became the leader of the DPRK in 2011, many North Koreans thought their lives were going to improve. But although he has allowed greater economic freedom, he has also sealed off the country more than ever, tightening security along the border with China and increasing punishments for those who cross it.<sup>61</sup>

The UN report mentions numerous human rights abuses, including murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, discrimination, forced abortions and sexual violence.<sup>62</sup> The government demands obedience through public executions, arbitrary detention, forced labour and religious persecution. Citizens have no basic freedoms. The coercive practice of punishing entire families for the alleged crimes of individuals is one means of keeping the population in line. The UN estimated in 2014 that between 80,000 and 120,000 people were held in camps, where torture and starvation are commonplace. The number seems to have stayed constant since then.<sup>63</sup>

After decades in political isolation, North Korea started last year diplomatic activity to obtain a partial lifting of UN sanctions. Nevertheless, while all the focus has been directed mainly toward denuclearisation, the subject of the human situation inside the country has been overlooked and it is disturbing to hear so little about the lives of ordinary North Koreans. Both the president of South Korea, Moon Jae-in, and the US, president Donald Trump, have avoided directly raising such issues with Kim Jong-un, eager as they were to achieve their own key objectives.<sup>64</sup>

However, as the report of the International Study Group on North Korea Policy<sup>65</sup> explains, the pursuit of immediate disarmament has not only

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59 King 2019.

60 UN 2014.

61 Fifield 2017<sup>a</sup>.

62 UN 2014; Parker 2018.

63 UN 2014.

64 Lim 2018.

65 FAS 2019.

distracted from a range of pressing challenges, but it has exacerbated them. It has generated incentives for Pyongyang to expand, diversify, and conceal its nuclear arsenal. In its current form, the international sanctions regime has contributed to the suffering of the North Korean people from privation and infectious diseases.

The US and its allies need a new strategy towards a nuclear North Korea that can not only manage the risks posed by the regime, but that will also help to shape its transformation over time to provide economic development and a sustainable foundation for security in the region.<sup>66</sup> Their support could move North Korea in the direction of engagement and encourage improvements in the human rights situation through economic investment and other activities, as well as initiate approaches to enhance the standard of living of the North Korean people.

## **Conclusions**

Since coming to power in at the end of 2011, Kim Jong-un has fulfilled North Korea's historical imperative by officially declaring, in the spring of 2018, that the country had a nuclear deterrent capable of striking the US. Since the adoption of the *Byungjin* policy, the country has been undergoing substantial military, economic, and social change, has increased the regime's stability and is allowing the lives of their people to improve. However, only the military and the elite ruling class are clearly benefitting from the new situation while a high percentage of the population still live under miserable conditions.

For decades, the world has been donating aid to help the North Koreans but has in effect been subsidising Pyongyang's choice to invest massively in the military at the expense of economic development. To date, sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council have been quite ineffective at restraining the excesses of the elites and have further harmed half of the population living in poverty. Donor fatigue has already emerged, as Pyongyang has been diverting this aid and spending it mainly on the nuclear programme, while, in contrast, around 3.8 million people need urgent food aid and medical assistance. Humanitarian aid is critical and, thus should flow independently from the denuclearisation talks. Therefore, assistance should be re-coordinated and channeled directly to the most vulnerable by means of specialised agencies, applying enough monitoring mechanisms to reassure potential donors.

Last year, Kim Jong-un initiated intense diplomatic activity seeking the lifting of the sanctions in order to boost economic development in his

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66 FAS 2019.

country. However, talks have been directed mainly toward denuclearisation and important issues related to the lives of ordinary people or the human rights situation have been widely overlooked. To address these problems, it is important to find a more realistic strategy, different to the demand of a one-step denuclearisation of North Korea that would also help to seek for economic development and benefit all the population.

There is an extreme gap between the military, the privileged elite and the rest of North Koreans that should be narrowed. Parallel development should benefit all the population, so it is important that the US and its allies, through economic investment and the coordination of other different projects, helps the North Korean regime to improve its human rights practices and develop approaches to better healthcare and nutrition for the most vulnerable and enhance the standard of living of the population. There are hopes that aid and cooperation could help revive diplomacy and engagement with North Korea to address this decades long problem.

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**List of acronyms**

DPRK, Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

PDS, Public Distribution System.

UN, United Nations.

UNDP, United Nations Development Programme.

US, United States.

WFP, World Food Programme.