



Economic sanctions and the rhetorical responses of totalitarian regimes: Examining North Korean rhetorical strategies, 1949–2010



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of economic statecraft on the North Korean Government. As a totalitarian regime, which is characterized by a controlled mass media, the North Korean Government tries to contain potential problems caused by sanctions by using three types of political rhetoric: *appeasement*, *backlash*, and *surveillance*. Using time-series data from 1949 to 2010 derived from a content analysis of the New Year's Day addresses by Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un, the empirical results suggests that the North Korean Government does alter its rhetorical strategies in response to external economic sanctions. Negative sanctions cause the regime to use *appeasement* strategies (or calls for reforms and internal changes). It tends to use *backlash* rhetoric (or blaming the sanctioning powers) in response to, interestingly, *positive* sanctions. *Surveillance* rhetoric, or the call for internal vigilance against enemies, on the other hand, does not have any statistical connection with sanctions, rather driven by other factors, such as the Korean War, external instability, and so on.

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Scholars have long studied the impact of economic statecraft on autocratic countries (Escribà-Folch and Wright, 2010; Licht, 2009; Drury and Li, 2006; Galtung, 1967) – however, little attention has been paid to the effect of economic sanctions on the political rhetoric of targeted countries. This paper studies how economic sanctions affect the ways in which the North Korean government responded rhetorically to external pressures of coercive diplomacy.

In this paper, it is argued that a totalitarian regime in its reaction to economic sanctions uses political rhetoric, such as *backlash*, *appeasement*, and *surveillance* (defined below) to mobilize the population. This study examines the effects of economic sanctions that the United States launched against the North Korean government from 1949 to 2010 (especially Foreign Assets Control Regulations (FACRs), and Export Administration Regulations (EARs)), had on the rhetoric the North Korean regime used to mobilize the country's population in response. I argue that negative sanctions provoke all three types of reactions, while positive sanctions only provoke two: *appeasement* and *surveillance*. Moreover, it is suggested that *surveillance* rhetoric is the most favored tactic of the North Korean government.

Unfortunately, although scholars have suggested that the economic sanctions have an impact on states such as North Korea, very little empirical studies exist as to what effects actually result from economic sanctions, and how these change over time. Using a unique dataset that analyzes the content of New Year's speeches of the "Great", "Dear" and "Brilliant" leaders (Kim Il Song, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un respectively) this study has demonstrated that autocratic countries try to minimize the impact of economic sanctions by using political mobilization via rhetorical responses.

The first section of this article discusses how the economic sanctions affect the targeted regimes both in positive and in negative ways. The impacts on targeted regime leaders in terms of their rhetorical tactics are discussed in the second section.

The third section discusses the measurement of rhetorical responses of the North Korean government by focusing on the measurements of *appeasement*, *backlash*, and *surveillance* rhetoric. In the final section, I empirically assess the hypotheses that are suggested in the second section and discuss the interpretation of those empirical tests.

1. The effect of economic statecraft

Economic sanctions are common diplomatic tools for countries to achieve their political goals. Baldwin (1971, 1985) defines these tools as “statecraft”, and argues that both positive and negative sanctions are instruments to exercise “power” (1985, p. 9). Power, in this case, refers to ability to alter the behavior of others. More specifically, Baldwin (1971) argues that power influences one’s decision-making process, and can be used to alter the behavior of targeted countries/political entities. For this reason, this study defines economic statecraft, in accordance with Baldwin (1971), as the diplomatic tools used to change policy.

Economic sanctions as a tool to alter the previous behavior of the targeted regimes are largely twofold and include both negative and positive sanctions. According to Baldwin (1985), negative economic sanctions are imposed as forms of embargo, boycott, tariff sanctions, quotas, or license denial (p. 41). These diplomatic tools coerce the target by punishment. On the other hand, positive sanctions alter targeted behavior by providing rewards. These include reductions of tariff, direct purchases, or trade subsidies.

Since negative sanctions punish the target by decreasing resources or restricting the opportunity for more resources, these types of sanctions fundamentally diminish the economic status of targets (Wood, 2008). However, Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003) argues that autocratic countries survive longer than democratic countries, because dictators only need to appease a small number of political elites. For this reason, as Bolks and Al-Sowayel (2000) argue in their research on the duration of sanctions, autocratic countries that quickly make countermeasures to sanctions remain in power longer than democratic countries. Escribà-Folch and Wright (2010) also argue that the effectiveness of economic sanctions is dependent on the regime type, especially the capability of institutional or structural appeasement. If economic sanctions actually decrease the amount of resources that are essential for political leaders to mitigate potential dissenters, leaders will become more repressive. Personalistic regimes and monarchs are more sensitive to the loss of resources because they lack the institutions to appease dissenters. On the other hand, single-party governments rely on “patronage” (p. 341) and mobilize it to support political leaders. For this reason, Escribà-Folch and Wright conclude that the effectiveness of economic sanctions are less when they are applied to single-party regimes.

Studies have also been conducted on the impact of positive sanctions on autocratic regimes (Bearce and Tirone, 2010; Escribà-Folch, 2010; Licht, 2009; Kono and Montinola, 2009). Positive sanctions and economic aid are expected to be beneficial to recipients by increasing resources, so that they can sometimes compensate the cost of economic reform (Bearce and Tirone, 2010) or increase the probability of the survival of autocratic countries in the short-term (Kono and Montinola, 2009). However, foreign aid has limited or conditional effects on autocratic regimes. For example, Kono and Montinola (2009) argue that democratic countries will receive more aid than autocratic countries in the long run, because the later usually stockpiles aid. The marginal effects of stockpiling aid decrease the possibility of receiving more. Moreover, positive sanctions can be harmful to the political survival of leaders (Licht, 2009), because there will be more discrepancy between winning coalitions and people who are excluded from the distribution. This can be also applied to people who were once eligible for this opportunity, but are relatively isolated from the new distribution. They will be dissatisfied with the government, increasing the possibility of uprising.

2. Tactics of totalitarian governments: the rhetoric of North Korea

In this section, the political tactics of autocratic governments are discussed, particularly the specific survival tools that are used by the North Korean government. Totalitarianism and autocracy are similar, but different in one respect. Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965) argue that autocracy and totalitarianism are closely related, but totalitarianism is an “adaptation” (p. 15) of autocracy to the modern world with more developed instruments – the mass media. The main characteristics of totalitarian governments are the “organization and methods” (p. 17) of control over the people, and the mass media is an appropriate instrument for mobilization. Gentile (2000) defines a totalitarian regime in terms of the “secular” (p. 19) power of political elites, and argues that totalitarian regimes pursue a “revolutionary anthropological experiment” (p. 20), which is maintained by pervasive political propaganda, violent repression, pedagogy of a charismatic leader, and isolation from the outside world. For example, North Korean regime is strongly reinforced by the unifying ideology of *Juche*. This ideology politically unifies citizens, allowing the North Korean government to maintain high-level surveillance via media-spread propaganda.

In this case, the most effective and distinctive way of manipulating citizens is through a controlled mass media. By using political rhetoric, the North Korean government tries to limit the effects of sanctions in promoting internal dissent by persuading the population to resist “enemies.” Krebs and Jackson (2007) point out that rhetoric itself can be regarded as a persuasive technique. Persuasion renders intentions or motives of both senders and targets – in this case, governments and the public. Persuasion means that changing a target’s perception, or beliefs can cause public to fully support the “rhetors.” However, since it is not easy to clearly define the intentions and motives of rhetoric, Krebs and Jackson focus more on the process itself rather than the effectiveness of the rhetoric. As Lee (2006) points out in his research on North Korea’s rhetoric in editorials, the role of newspapers and editorials in North Korea is to appeal to the public. Since the North Korean government cannot alter the economic policy actions of the United States government, rhetorical tactics become more common, and they continuously plead for loyalty and support of the regime by the population.

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