Food Aid Can’t Buy You Love: The Role of Humanitarian Assistance in North Korea
By Karin J. Lee

The debate over humanitarian assistance, and in particular food aid, for North Korea has for years been bedeviled by disagreements over whether that assistance should be linked to engagement in other areas such as security issues. Karin J. Lee explores whether US government assistance to the North has played a role in achieving US security objectives.

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE has played a significant role in engaging North Korea. This type of engagement takes many forms and is implemented in the pursuit of multiple goals beyond the basic humanitarian aims of improving health or reducing poverty. In this essay, I will look only at the question of whether or not US government humanitarian assistance to North Korea has been effective in achieving US security objectives.1

I will address three forms of linkage between US humanitarian and security goals: as a means of improving the environment for security dialogue; as a quid pro quo for North Korean actions; and as a means of transforming either North Korea itself or the US-North Korea relationship. Linking humanitarian goals to security goals has been an ongoing dilemma in the United States, raising questions about both ethics and efficacy. I find that food aid, while perhaps useful for reaching security goals in the short term, does not permanently transform the security environment — and neither should it be expected to do so.

Food Aid Under Clinton and Bush
While in the ideal world, humanitarian and security goals should never be connected, in reality US assistance to North Korea has always been linked to a broader security agenda. North Korea first sought bilateral assistance from the US in 1994, requesting a million metric tons of food while the United States and North Korea were in the midst of nuclear negotiations. State Department official Ken Quinones explained to North Korean officials that under US law, the US could only provide food aid if the North were experiencing a famine. However, later that year, he arranged for a privately funded shipment of vaccines to be sent to North Korea in response to an outbreak of cholera. Quinones and Ambassador Robert Gallucci, then the lead US negotiator with North Korea, noted that “the provision of the vaccine had a salutary effect during the negotiations, building goodwill among their normally suspicious North Korean interlocutors.”2 While it is impossible to know with certainty, this gift may have contributed positively to momentum for the signing of the Agreed Framework later that year. Regardless, from the beginning, even privately funded assistance from the US was indirectly tied to the security dialogue in the minds of the North Koreans and State Department negotiators.

Famine conditions were not exactly a prerequisite to aid. Although in the mid-1990s a number of legal barriers stood in the way of US-government funded assistance to North Korea, including but not limited to the country’s inclusion at that time on the list of State Sponsors of Terror and its status as a nonmarket state, many of these restrictions could be waived or avoided. It would be more accurate to say that an emergency had to exist, rather than a famine per se. The US initially remained wary of being tricked by the North Koreans, but skepticism over the dire need faded in 1996, when US government eyewitnesses reported hungry children congregating in public
Although some scholars reject all nutritional surveys conducted in North Korea as inadequate, the World Food Program (WFP) has based its work in part on monitoring standards thus far; the 2008/2009 monitoring protocol, which prioritized humanitarian concerns. Noland later received a note from a former Karin Lee and Adam Miles, “North Korea on Capitol Hill” in John Feffer, ed. The Future of US-Korean Relations: The Imbalance of Power (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 160-178; Lee, “The United States Humanitarian Experience.”


6 United States Humanitarian Experience.”


8 Of the many reasons posited for the premature ending of the program, one may be that North Korea reacted negatively to the suspension of shipments. If so, were they rejecting the very concept of needs-based programming? That doesn’t seem to be the case, since access — a good indicator of the humanitarian basis of programming — was good in 2011 and 2012.


In 1998, the reported rate of acute malnutrition or wasting was 18.7 percent — far below the usual 30 percent that is used as one of three indicators of famine conditions. In the first years of aid to the North, troubling indicators attested to a crisis exceeding survey results. However, as those indicators gradually faded, all donors, including the US, continued to provide aid — not to avert emergency but to alleviate disturbingly high rates of malnutrition. From a humanitarian perspective, chronic malnutrition not only harms individual growth, but also stymies a country’s development, burdening it with health care costs and limitations on human resources. Ending chronic malnutrition requires not just food aid but development programming, as discussed below.

Some NGO staff implementing US government-funded food programs believed that during the administration of President Bill Clinton the US provided funding for aid not only in order to meet humanitarian needs but also to create goodwill and provide an incentive to North Korea to participate in security negotiations. During this period, at the behest of the US Congress, the Government Accountability Office issued three reports on US-funded aid in North Korea. In addition to monitoring, the reports also addressed linkage; the 2002 report observed that aid to the North “continued in part because State believed the donations might improve bilateral relations.” Haggard and Noland take this a step further, arguing that food aid was given in direct exchange for North Korean political concessions; they identify eight “food for meeting” or “food for inspection” quid pro quos under Clinton. The truth is likely more complex. At the least, intensive negotiations on security issues allow for more in-depth discussions on humanitarian concerns.

Noland later received a note from a former Clinton administration official stating, “We would have provided food aid whether the North Koreans participated in various meetings or not, assuming we could adequately monitor the aid to assure it reached beneficiaries. There was no policy, virtual or otherwise, of ‘food for meetings.’”

Nevertheless, Haggard and Noland suggest that President George W. Bush also attempted to trade food for advances in security, but that such attempts failed. Ironically, it is perhaps as a result of the failed linkage that the food program implemented during the Bush administration can boast the best monitoring standards thus far; the 2008/2009 USAID-funded program broke new ground in delinking aid from security goals. This transition to aid on a more humanitarian basis began during US-North Korea government negotiations on the criteria for needs-based programming. Shipments of food aid were contingent on implementation of the monitoring protocol, which prioritized humanitarian concerns over other political goals. Even after the US and North Korea failed to reach agreement on a denunciation verification protocol in December 2008, shipments to the NGOs continued. Unfortunately, the WFP and its North Korean counterpart agency were less successful at implementing the new protocol, and as a result, USAID suspended shipments to the WFP. In March 2009, in the first months of President Barack Obama’s administration, North Korea ended the program prematurely, leaving some of the aid in the country unmonitored — a problem that would need to be addressed as part of any future food aid program.

The Food Aid “Non-Program” Under Obama

As I write, the Obama administration has provided $1.5 million in response to flooding, but no food aid. The administration’s decision not to provide food aid during its first term was a long process that began in January 2011, when North Korea first requested food aid from the US. It reached its zenith on Feb. 29, 2012, when a nutrition program was announced along with a number of understandings regarding security measures, but ended in April 2012, following North Korea’s failed rocket launch.

In the spring and early summer of 2011, need assessments were conducted by US NGOs, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the WFP, the European Community Humanitarian Office and US government officials. The US assessment included preliminary negotiations with the North Koreans on monitoring; however, US government officials were not authorized to make final decisions and negotiations were therefore inconclusive.

Following the US mission, administration officials said they weren’t able to provide aid because of uncertainty regarding need and lack of agreement on a monitoring regime. Neither rational sense entirely true. All four assessments reportedly found the same thing (the US assessment was never publicly released); widespread chronic malnutrition and pockets of acute malnutrition, with concern that fragile conditions could easily worsen. As noted above, chronic rather than acute malnutrition had been sufficient for the US to provide aid under Clinton and Bush. US NGOs have reported that North Korea agreed to implement monitoring measures beyond the 2008/2009 programming, a message the NGOs say they passed on to the government. Furthermore, even without USAID funding, North Korea and the WFP began implementing some of the improved monitoring protocols on USAID’s list of demands, such as Korean-speaking monitors, access to markets, increased access during nutritional surveys and better supply management — all significant improvements.

The Obama administration has continued to assert that it did not link food aid to security goals either when it offered the assistance or when it withdrew the offer: the official rationale...
for suspending the offer was that if the North Koreans couldn’t be trusted to stick to the Leap Day Agreement in 2012, they also couldn’t be trusted to implement a monitoring regime.11 Yet the World Food Program has continued to implement the monitoring protocol mentioned above, belying the administration’s assertion.

The Role of Congress
The US Congress has played a central role in limiting food aid as part of the engagement process. In 2011, concern about monitoring, which outlives the standard food-aid funding accounts for assistance to North Korea. The amendment passed the House but was modified in conference with the Senate; the resulting language toothlessly conditioned food aid to all countries on adequate monitoring. However, the report accompanying the final bill indicated increasing congressional concern about the use of food aid as a political tool. When the Leap Day Agreement with North Korea was announced the following year, four senators registered their concern, critiquing not only the administration’s “appesement” policy but also its provision of food aid as a quid pro quo.12

This environment may help to explain why the administration continues to deny any linkage on its part. At a March 2013 hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Ambassador Glyn Davies, Special Representative for North Korea Policy, held North Korea responsible for the linkage, saying that “the North Koreans were insisting that the offer that we had made of the 240,000 metric tons be linked to the concessions they were going to make on nuclear missiles. So they had forced that linkage from their side. We don’t use food as a weapon or a tool, and we don’t link it to political matters.”13

Strengths and Limitations of Food Aid
Perhaps the administration could have evaded the linkage by providing aid earlier, before a security agreement had been negotiated; the assessments provided ample rationale to do so. Yet even so, Davies’ reported scenario echoes Ken Quinones’ conversation with North Korean interlocutors nearly 20 years earlier, underscoring that the US-North Korea dynamic hasn’t changed.

Unfortunately, while food aid undoubtedly saved many lives and nutrition in North Korea has markedly improved over the last dozen years, chronic malnutrition persists for nearly one-third of the population under the age of six. Though the persistence of such need is tragic, it is hardly a surprise. Food aid is a temporary measure. Creating a permanent improvement in food security in any country takes a much more comprehensive approach that includes the domestic government overseeing the continual evolution of multiple systems including the agricultural economy, its interaction with the broader domestic economy and the country’s interaction with the global economy. Davies’ March 2013 explanation above was given in response to this question from Senator Christopher Murphy:

To what extent is food aid an actual tool to recalibrate their strategic interests? We have certainly had success in these temporary agreements by exchanging food aid for concessions on their nuclear program. But of course, as we saw with the Leap Day Agreement, it can blow up within months.14

The short answer is that just as food aid cannot permanently improve food security, neither can food aid permanently after security calculations. The provision of food aid may have contributed to an improved environment, paving the way for negotiations under the Clinton administration. And, if we accept Haggard and Noland’s premise, then the Clinton administration effectively exchanged aid for participation in talks and an inspection; they got the quid for the quo. But the security benefits fostered by the provision of food aid eventually evaporated just as food aid itself is a temporary measure that does not permanently improve food security. Food aid should be given purely for humanitarian, not political, reasons. The longer answer is more complicated; some of the results of food assistance are more enduring. On a person-to-person level, food aid creates multiple opportunities for North Koreans to adopt a new image of the US. We have seen in many disasters around the world that this good will can have a lasting impact, even if it does not quickly penetrate government decision-making. Furthermore, interactions between aid agencies and their North Korean counterparts accomplished several things: they introduced liberal norms to the North Korean government; demonstrated the value of a humanitarian approach that is not subordinated to a “war/national security mentality”; proved that a “decline in secrecy” does not “necessarily result in invasion or increased vulnerability;” and provided multiple experiences in win-some, lose-some negotiations in which disagreements were successfully negotiated.15

A UN Food and Agriculture Organization review of assessment reports provides a good example of how an extended presence expands the range of dialogue. In 1995, the FAO report reflected a North Korean viewpoint “Almost ideal baseline conditions exist in Korea DPR for food-for-work. The country’s principle of ‘juche’ or self-reliance means that the mass mobilization of the population to undertake community work projects is guaranteed.”16

In contrast, recent FAO reports are frank about the role of the market in increasing productivity, as this excerpt from the 2012 report illustrates: “Lack of access to farmers’ markets at least for the produce over and above the allocated production quota remains a major limitation. A meaningful reform in the marketing system may provide necessary incentive to farmers to produce more on the co-operative farms as well as on their own small kitchen garden plots and help alleviate critical shortage of staple food in the country.”17

Critics may rightfully point out that the ability to have a transparent discussion about the impact on productivity of pricing, procurement, access to the market and so on nearly 20 years after the first FAO assessment is hardly cause for celebration. But the laws of the US and most Western countries prohibit non-emergency or development funding for North Korea, and therefore conversations about the role of the market in increasing food security must remain at the dialogue stage only.

Improving Lives
In the short term, the provision of well-monitored food aid saves lives and improves nutrition to demonstrably needy populations. There have also been long-term improvements in program implementation, accountability and problem identification. From a humanitarian perspective, the conversation should end there. However, some form of linkage, whether implicit, as an “environment changer,” or explicit, as a quid pro quo, might unfortunately be inescapable. In the face of the current standoff, some economists are calling for an increase rather than a decrease in economic engagement. A future study might compare the linkage of humanitarian assistance with development aid as a means to achieving security goals; development aid, which is much more likely to permanently improve human security, may be equally likely to permanently transform the security calculus.

Karin J. Lee is Executive Director of the National Committee on North Korea in Washington, DC.