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Foreign Policy and Language: United States Economic Sanctions Against North Korea

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Abstract. This article analyzes two elements of language that frequent the discourse on United States foreign policy towards the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The analysis bears on the consequences of language for policy.

United States (US) President Clinton has ordered an easing of economic sanctions against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The rationale for the easing of sanctions is to help induce the DPRK to abandon nuclear weapons and various missile programs. However, the policy is based on two elements of language that contribute to the construction of a reality that belies many "facts on the ground."

The first is what US Representative Benjamin Gilman, Chairman of the House International Relations Committee, calls "extortion." He asserts that the DPRK engages in extortion through intentionally engaging in threatening behavior with the purpose of creating a crisis that the US and its allies will seek to defuse through the provision of benefits and/or the attenuating of sanctions. If this, indeed, is extortion, then the foreign policies of all governments are implicated. The sine qua non of foreign policy is engaging in threatening behavior, behavior seeming to present the converse of threat, and various behavioral combinations of threat and its converse to achieve political objectives. By applying the extortion label to DPRK foreign policy, one might really mean that the DPRK is a one-trick pony with threat as its only trick. This, in turn suggests, that the DPRK threat would be easier to tolerate in relations between the itself and the US if threat were at times replaced by its converse--i.e., extortion is fine if it doesn't occur too often.

The extortion label might also suggest outrage that the DPRK is engaging in what yet another government--viz., that of the US--employs as a foreign policy tool. Actually this cognitive stance of damning those who say what we say and do as we do is seen throughout the foreign policy world. It only becomes more salient to observers and, perhaps, less noticed by practitioners in the hands of a hegemon or superpower.

The second element of language concerns the term "dual usage." Because the ROK is still classified by the US as a terrorist state, the latter cannot export goods with both a military and civilian purpose to the former. This there is a qualification to the easing economic sanctions against the DPRK. The problem is that while the "dual usage" term suggests that some goods have only a civilian purpose, others a military purpose, still others both, all goods can have military and civilian purposes. Most simply put, the purpose for which a product is developed does not limit it being applied for other purposes. Less simply, but more philosophically coherent, a purpose is not an intrinsic property of an object. In fact, a purpose is a property of the beholder and user of a product--and that property can vary in permanence. A policy even partially founded on purpose sinks inevitably in quicksand. The same applies--in consonance with this argument--if the conveyors of such language "really mean" that products vary in the degree to which civilian and military purposes can be applied. Here the variance is dependent on the beholder and user, not the product. And again, this variance itself varies within, between, and among people.

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Yes, there are multiple subtexts of ideologies, self-interests, abilities, motivations--even situations in which ambiguity as a communication style and rhetorical and semantic techniques are to be prized--that can characterize foreign policymaking. But employing elements of language that contribute to constructing realities belied by empirical observation may seem a puzzling approach to navigating through the threats and opportunities of the material word. (See Brand, J.L. (1996). Can we decide between logical positivism and social construction views of reality? *American Psychologist*, 51, 652-653; Cheung, M. (1997). Social construction theory and the Satir model: Toward a synthesis. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 25, 331-343; Lannamann, J.W. (1998). Social construction and materiality: The limits of indeterminacy in therapeutic settings. *Family Process*, 37, 393-413; Robinson, W.P. (1998). Language and social psychology: An intersection of opportunities and significance. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 17, 276-301; Sanger, D. (September 18, 1999). U.S. eases economic sanctions against North Korea. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>.) (Keywords: Dual Usage, Economic Sanctions, Extortion, Language, North Korea.)