

NORTH KOREA'S PANDEMIC CONUNDRUM: SELF-CONTAINMENT AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

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North Korea acknowledged its healthcare crisis this May and retreated to the Zero-COVID policy under self-containment, which they adopted in early 2020. Pyongyang also perceived economic stresses when they decided to loosen border control on trade with China last autumn. Since Kim Jong Un and other leaders of North Korea declared an extreme national emergency regarding COVID-19 just after acknowledging the pandemic cases, a humanitarian crisis has loomed. To prevent the crisis, this issue brief posits that the international community should consider providing sufficient necessities to the North Korean people, despite resistance they may face from Pyongyang.

The pandemic's unexpected and direct impact on the Korean Peninsula was reflected in North Korea's aggressiveness toward the Republic of Korea. Pyongyang's self-imposed containment caused the suspension of inter-Korean dialogue and developed into confrontational propaganda against Seoul to justify the self-containment. The inter-Korean liaison office blown up by North Korea in June 2020 is evidence of this aggressiveness. Since North Korea significantly decreased its trade with China due to its proactive COVID-19 prevention policy, it could not utilize bilateral trade with China during the pandemic to evade international

sanctions and domestic discontent and difficulties multiplied. North Korea prioritized coping with internal instability rather than achieving an improved security environment through stable relations with the ROK or the U.S. Therefore, focusing on possible internal instability, Pyongyang chose to close its doors based on their suspicion that other countries could exploit domestic difficulties for hostile purposes. While criticizing the ROK, Pyongyang consolidated its traditional friendship with China given its understanding that China was more interested in stability in North Korea. If the COVID-19 crisis ends soon, can inter-Korean

relations improve? Can these relations return to pre-pandemic normalcy?

On May 12, North Korea acknowledged the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis in its territory through Kim Jong Un's address at the 8th Political Bureau of the 8th Central Committee of WPK (Workers' Party of Korea). Since North Korea had previously refused to recognize the existence of any COVID-19 case, many international observers wondered whether this abrupt acknowledgment could be a prelude to a change in Pyongyang's external relations. International observers became curious whether North Korea wanted enhanced domestic control or emergency humanitarian cooperation.¹ On the same day as Kim Jong Un's announcement, the Chinese government suggested that it was ready to support Pyongyang in coping with COVID-19 cases.²

Taking a closer look, the COVID-19 epidemic in North Korea has more complex aspects seeing as it presented as both an economic and healthcare crisis. In early 2020, North Korea decided to cope with COVID-19 by being isolated from the infected outside world. The solution, however, gave rise to an economic crisis in that its economy was not self-reliant. North Korea, therefore, tried to

Pyongyang's self-imposed containment caused the suspension of inter-Korean dialogue and developed into confrontational propaganda against Seoul to justify the self-containment. It also could not utilize bilateral trade with China to ease domestic shortages.

As the threat of COVID-19 waned, Pyongyang began to hold large political events. This however led to an upsurge in COVID cases, forcing the North Korean leaders to admit the existence of COVID-19 patients within their country in May.

adopt limited openness to China in late 2021, but COVID-19 cases finally occurred domestically late spring. North Korea returned to square one of this pandemic again, and will likely resort to its past wrong solutions consisting of self-containment and limited openness to China repeatedly without finding an exit until it faces a serious humanitarian crisis. Exiting from the dual crisis is, therefore, a challenge in itself.

COVID-19 and Self-containment

COVID-19 cases first appeared in China late January of 2020. Shortly after, North Korea began to close its borders with China. When the suspected cases of COVID-19 in China's Liaoning province exceeded 300, North Korea began limiting all flights and trains between the two countries and officially halted them on January 29, 2020. Since then, as Pyongyang introduced the nationwide emergency epidemic prevention campaign, every foreigner and contacted person was isolated for more than 30 days. In late February 2020, Kim Jong Un ordered all domestic organizations to focus on responses to the pandemic, stating that the response to COVID-19 was not just a simple quarantine but a "significant national project of human security."³ Then, the supreme assembly of North Korea extended the isolation period for suspected infected citizens from 30 days to 40 days.

Following over one year under total isolation, North Korea then began to convene some party conferences including the 10th Youth Alliance Congress (April 2021) and the 7th Women's Federation Congress (June 2021). Through strict quarantine and containment policy, North Korea managed the risk of COVID-19. The North Korean government slightly eased quarantine measures in the summer of 2020 when they allowed the full reopening of schools. However, Pyongyang continued thorough control measures such as the complete blockade of Kaesong City (July 2020). In September 2020, the government began testing by introducing COVID-19 test kits and related equipment.⁴ The testing was minimal, about 100 tests per week. As the threat of COVID-19 waned, Pyongyang began to hold large political events. Moreover, when the 10th anniversary of Kim Jong Un's April 2012 inauguration approached, North Korea moved to ease the total containment policy.

Nevertheless, coronavirus infected a significant number of North Koreans in Pyongyang after large political events in the spring of 2022. For example, the North Korean government gathered a massive group to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Kim Jong Un's rule in April 2022. Participants at the

Pyongyang revealed its concern about domestic economic depression when in June 2021, Kim Jong Un issued a special order to stabilize the livelihoods of ordinary North Korean citizens – wartime food stockpiles would be supplied for domestic consumption.

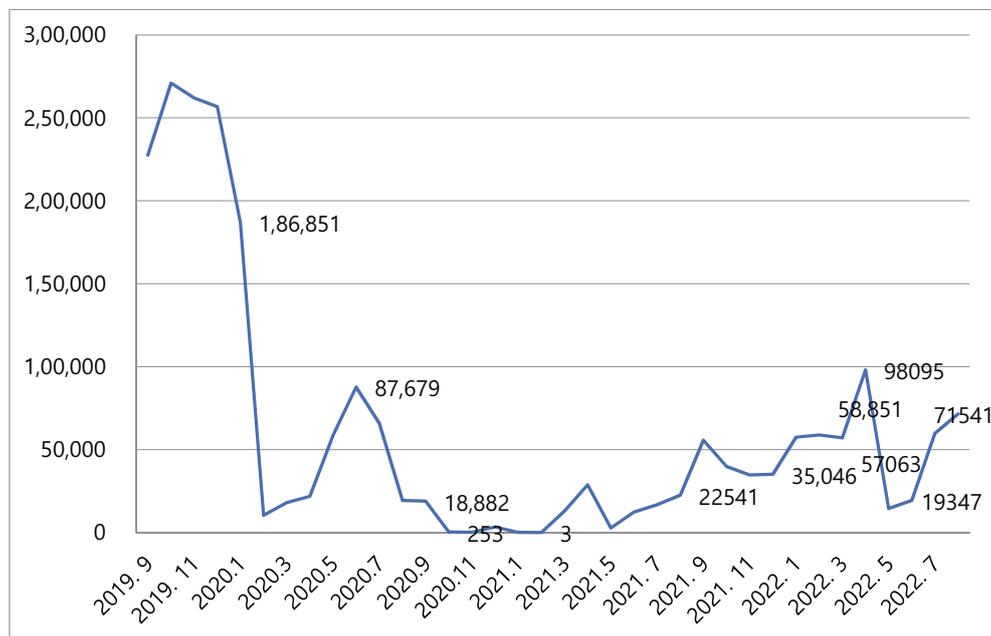
Kim Jong Un has praised China's Zero-COVID approach. But, whereas China has enough financial capacity to overcome economic difficulties under the Zero-COVID policy, North Korea does not have the material capacity to maintain a national and regional lockdown.

anniversary event did not wear masks. As a result, the virus spread through the country and North Korean leaders later admitted the existence of COVID-19 patients within their country on May 12, 2022. On May 22, the North Korean authority announced they had 186,090 new COVID-19 cases.⁵ North Korea also stated that the total number of suspected cases was over 4.8 million.⁶ The total number of active cases was at least 490 in late July.⁷ Although Pyongyang insisted only having a small number of fever cases, North Korea has since sharply decreased border trade between its territory and China.

Economic Instability under Self-containment

North Korea experienced the dilemma of choosing between the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus and economic instability under their national self-containment policy.⁸ Bilateral trade with China was strictly reduced from February 2020 even though it should have been allowed so as to prevent domestic food shortages. After the self-containment policy restricted contact with the outside world for one and a half years, Pyongyang revealed its concern about domestic economic

Table 1: North Korea's imports from China (January 2019 – August 2022)



(Unit: 1,000 US\$)

Source: General Administration of Customs, PRC website (<http://www.customs.gov.cn/>).

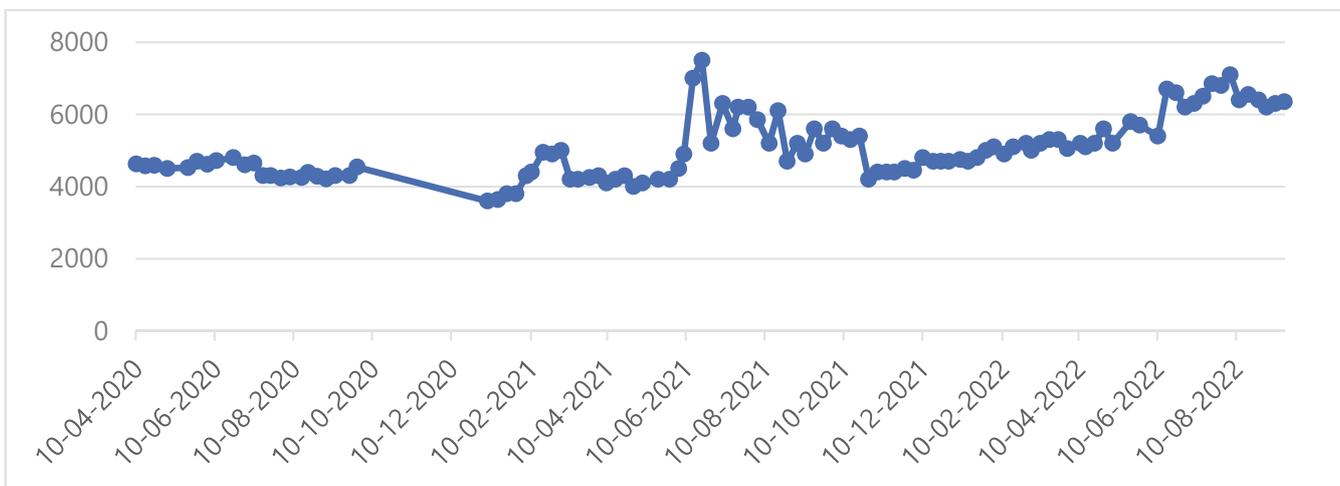
depression. Most notably, general secretary Kim Jong-Un discussed the upcoming poor crop problem in North Korea on June 15, 2021, and during the 3rd plenum of the 8th central committee of the WPK.⁹ On the last day of the 3rd plenum, Kim Jong Un issued a special order to stabilize the livelihoods of ordinary North Korean citizens – wartime food stockpiles would be supplied for domestic consumption.¹⁰

To cope with food insecurity, Pyongyang was forced to lift the tight control of bilateral trade with China in September 2021. China's exports to North Korea, therefore, grew incrementally, doubling the amount of the bilateral export of the previous month (see Table 1). Freight trains between China and North Korea also resumed operation in January 2022. Chinese exports to North Korea consistently grew until April 2022, recording the highest amount (about US\$98 million) since the COVID outbreak.¹¹

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However, Pyongyang again cut bilateral trade with China to cope with increasing COVID-19 cases in May 2022. This further exacerbated economic instability in the country. China's exports to North Korea sharply decreased to US\$14 million in May and remained nearly unchanged the next month (see Table 1). Since then, rice prices in North Korea have been rising (see Table 2), creating a staple food shortage for citizens. In early August, rice prices soared to as high as 7,100 NK Won. Even though North Korea stayed externally silent on the international front this summer, internal economic

Table 2: Rice Price in North Korea (April 2020 – September 2022)



(Unit: North Korean Won)

Source: Latest market price index on the Rimjin-Gang website (<https://www.asiapress.org/korean/nk-korea-prices/>).

difficulties were significant. In June 2021, when rice prices skyrocketed, Kim Jong Un issued a special economic order and eventually, three months later, relaxed national self-containment orders to stabilize the market. Similarly, despite the risk of increasing COVID-19 cases, North Korea relaxed control over bilateral trade between China and North Korea this July (see Table 1). Imports from China grew from US\$19 million in the previous month to about US\$60 million. This only confirms that Pyongyang can not ignore its neighbours' role in assuaging domestic economic challenges.

Looming Humanitarian Crisis

Self-reliance and national self-containment have been Pyongyang's approaches toward COVID-19 since early 2020 and these policies continue into late 2022. Just after Kim Jong Un acknowledged the existence of domestic pandemic cases, he stated that all cities and counties should implement self-containment and all companies and construction projects to operate in isolation to prevent the spread of the infectious virus.¹² He also expressed his support for China's Zero-COVID approach, claiming that North Korea should learn from the advancement and experiences China demonstrated during their

struggle against COVID-19.¹³ This suggests that Pyongyang would maintain the North Korean Zero-COVID strategy rather than accept Chinese economic assistance.¹⁴ Whereas China has enough financial capacity to overcome economic difficulties under the Zero-COVID policy, North Korea does not have the material capacity to maintain a national and regional lockdown.¹⁵ Therefore, the North Korean crisis is a dual crisis revealing its vulnerability to the virus and exposing its economic poverty. If North Korea chooses to reopen border trade to alleviate the difficulties, it will not be able to control the spread of COVID cases. Furthermore, Pyongyang lacks the testing capability to identify infected people during a large-scale outbreak of COVID-19¹⁶ and has only Chinese vaccines that are less effective in protecting against the disease.¹⁷ Until now, North Korea had experienced the pandemic and economic threats one after the other. But, now the simultaneous pandemic crisis and food insecurity portend an implosion of domestic discontent against Pyongyang. Thus, North Korean leaders must find a new, third way. Since the international community has the potential to help North Korea build necessary healthcare and economic capabilities, North Korea's dual crisis should be the topic of further consideration in regard to its engagement with Pyongyang.

As the national lockdown extends, the resultant economic disaster is likely to trigger political instability. The recent increase in rice prices could result in the starvation of its common citizenry. In June 2021, North Korea could have released food stockpiles to alleviate food insecurity following Kim Jong Un's special order, and consequently lacks enough domestic stockpiles to mobilize this year.¹⁸ Also, reopening trade with China has proved increasingly challenging after the outbreak of domestic COVID cases in North Korea. Dandong, the major border city between North Korea and China, was under lockdown by early July so North Korea couldn't restart bilateral trade at its choice. Until mid-September this year, North Korea has been waiting for the Chinese response to restart rail trade.¹⁹ The ones suffering are the citizens and those most vulnerable in society. In July 2022, some reports suggested "rumors of people starving to death in some parts of Kangwon Province, Kaesong and Ryanggang Province."²⁰ Although the previous famine in the 1990s could not shatter the illusion of socialism, this second famine will likely bring political resistance from North Koreans, who have already experienced food shortages.

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Interestingly, however, North Korea's economic problems can lead to a diplomatic compromise with the U.S. In 1994, when Pyongyang appeared determined to conduct a war with Washington, Kim Il Sung resolved that first nuclear crisis by meeting with former President Jimmy Carter (after Kim Il Sung took domestic food shortage seriously). He chose external stability with diplomatic dialogue to prevent domestic chaos. The fundamental determinant of the 1994 Agreed Framework in Geneva was in fact the food shortage in North Korea brought on by the loss of the barter trading system among communist countries. Although the international community is currently more alert to the possibility of a 7th North Korean nuclear test, the motivation behind the Pyongyang's recent provocative behavior, such as missile launches, can be the acquisition of more bargaining chips for a second framework. In the past, Pyongyang removed fuel rods from its atomic reactor and proposed establishing a new peace regime on the Korean Peninsula in the spring of 1994. These behaviors were strategic moves to transform the denuclearization talk from a narrow negotiation about IAEA inspections to a broader one to discuss a peace treaty as compensation for its return to the Nonproliferation Treaty. Once again, North Korea may consider getting a feasible negotiation by enlarging the agenda through strategic provocation, including a nuclear test.

Searching for Maximum International Cooperation

While deterring North Korea's further provocations, interested parties should not ignore the possibility of a diplomatic engagement in this multifaceted crisis. Even when North Korean dictators have previously ignored economic difficulties plaguing their citizens, they have had the political discernment to prevent internal crises which actually enabled the U.S.-DPRK negotiations of the 1990s. Current provocations on behalf of North Korea could be interpreted as a strategic move to induce the United States to enter negotiations.

However, even if the U.S.-DPRK talks achieve a compromise, they cannot prevent a humanitarian crisis. Notably, a great famine occurred one year after the U.S. and DPRK reached the 1994 Geneva agreement. In 1995, unprecedented flooding in North Korea caused a great famine that killed 0.2-3.5 million people.²¹ The famine continued for three subsequent years. Accordingly, the international community responded to the crisis with emergency relief measures and massive food assistance to North Korea for more than five years.²² North Korea then announced the end of the “Arduous March” in 2000.

The international community should remain focused on the internal instability and humanitarian crisis within North Korea. Even though neighboring countries such as the Republic of Korea would assist North Korea in alleviating their suffering, international humanitarian efforts should include countries such as Sweden and India who already have existing friendly relations with North Korea. Diverse international actors will be able to establish an inclusive relief system distributing food, medical supplies, and healthcare materials to prevent massive starvation and protect civilians from the pandemic, other diseases, and natural disasters. An approach solely focused on the human dignity of North Koreans will be able to prevent another humanitarian crisis. Unless international actors take action, North Korea is at risk of either becoming a satellite state of another authoritarian country or of sacrificing the economic future and welfare of its citizens for its own political survival.

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