



# COVID-19 and North Korea's Choices: Shifting Away from 'A Head-on Breakthrough' Line?

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Coronavirus, officially called COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO), hit the world hard. Since its outbreak in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, it has spread internationally, from neighboring countries such as South Korea and Japan, to North America and Europe by the end of March 2020.

## Coronavirus in North Korea

It is reasonable to assume that the coronavirus has also spread to North Korea although the country has officially denied any infections to date. North Korea's *Rodong Sinmun* reported on February 20 that "not one novel coronavirus patient has emerged." However, the international community casts doubt on North Korea's claim. On February 12, Deputy of Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) representative Bir Mandal stated that "his team doubted North Korea's claim that there were zero cases of the COVID-19 infection in the country." General Robert Abrams, commander of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), mentioned in his briefing on March 13 that "the United States (U.S.) is fairly certain there are coronavirus cases in North Korea because of a noticeable lack of military activity." North Korea also has a history of holding back from acknowledging infections during the SARS and MERS outbreaks.

## Impact of Coronavirus on North Korea

It is almost impossible to know the exact situation in North Korea, yet it is obvious that the coronavirus would be a real daunting challenge to the North Korean regime if it spreads nationwide. North Korea is facing serious economic difficulties because of sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council and the U.S. Kim Jong-un himself acknowledged the deteriorated economic situation in the fifth plenary session of the seventh Central Committee last December, saying that “[North Korea’s] strong conviction is protecting the country’s dignity and winning [against] imperialism [through its] own efforts even if people have to starve.” He also used the word, “self-reliance,” most frequently in the final report of the session. Such statement rescinds the promise he made in April 2014 to “never let [his] people starve.” The coronavirus will add more hardship to an already devastated North Korean economy. For instance, the North Korean government decided to shut down all its borders in January and suspended its trade with China, which is considered a lifeline for the North Korean economy.

An additional burden for Pyongyang is the heightened expectation of a better life shared among the North Korean public. Since 2018, North Koreans have seen a series of summits between their leader and presidents of the U.S. and South Korea. These summits inevitably raised anticipation for a better life among North Koreans by lowering the barrier of economic sanctions. However, with a further deteriorated economy and no imminent sign of improvement in their livelihood, it is likely that the North Koreans will experience greater disappointment due to their increased expectation.

Coronavirus can be fatal for the North Korean regime amid the current situation. The virus itself can kill thousands of North Koreans if it spreads. According to the Global Health Security Index published by Johns Hopkins University in 2019, North Korea ranked 193<sup>rd</sup> among 195 countries in the category of health security and capabilities. More importantly, North Korea ranked bottom in its ability to rapidly respond to and mitigate the spread of an epidemic. Serious economic difficulties that accompany the novel coronavirus may cause people’s frustration to rise. Higher frustration levels can evolve into civil unrest and even large-scale uprisings, which would be the most unnerving challenge for the North Korean government in maintaining regime security, especially if it fails to prevent the spread of the virus.

## The Coronavirus and Accommodation of North Korea

Because of the serious implications that the coronavirus has on the regime, there is an increased possibility for the North Korean government to readjust some of its policies, if it hasn't done so already. It seems that coronavirus has scaled down North Korea's provocations. At the fifth plenary session of the seventh Central Committee, North Korea expressed the possibility of resuming its postponed intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests. Kim Jong-un warned that he will "move onto a shocking action to get [remittance] for North Korea's pain and suppressed development" and threatened by stating that "the world will witness a new strategic weapon that North Korea will soon possess." At the same time, however, it was somewhat expected that North Korea would launch either a Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM), a satellite launch rocket, or a Medium-Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM) to counter the R.O.K-U.S. drill in March since it has been actively critical of joint military exercises.

North Korea partook in three missile tests on March 2, 9, and 21, yet these provocations were not as of high intensity as the short-range ballistic missile tests that the regime had displayed last year. More importantly, following the launch, North Korea's official media released reports that they were a part of "routine military exercise" and abstained from condemning South Korea and the U.S.

Another sign that shows North Korea's policy adjustment to the current coronavirus situation is Kim Jong-un's unexpected friendly letter to South Korean president Moon Jae-in on March 4. It was particularly surprising in two ways.

First, a day before the South Korean government announced it had received Kim Jong-un's personal letter, Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's sister and close aid, issued a public statement in which she criticized South Korea by calling the Blue House, the presidential office, "idiotic" and blamed it for having magnified "[North Korea's] distrust, hatred and scorn for [South Korea] as a whole." Such statement by Kim Yo-jong—who is considered a symbolic figure representing peace and inter-Korean reconciliation by the South Korean government—served as a particularly severe blow to deteriorating relations between the two Koreas. Yet, less than 24 hours later, Kim Jong-un's personal letter which contained a very contrasting message was delivered to South Korea. Kim mentioned in his letter that "he was worried about President Moon's health and also expressed his frustration that there isn't much that he can do to help at this moment." While there have been cases where North Korea sent ambivalent messages to South Korea, Kim's message to Moon was very unusual considering the overall timing and context.

Second, it was the first friendly message that North Korea had sent to South Korea since the breakdown of the Hanoi summit between the U.S. and North Korea in February 2019. It was particularly remarkable because although South Korea did not accommodate what North Korea demanded, North Korea alluded to the possibility of improving relations with South Korea. Kim Jong-un made very clear in April 2019 by stating that “[South Korea] ... should not be playing the role of a meddlesome mediator or a facilitator, but should instead prioritize inter-Korean relations over its relationship with the United States, and fulfill the promises made to the North in the Panmunjom and Pyongyang Declarations.” In other words, Kim suggested that North Korea would not hold meaningful exchanges with South Korea unless Seoul deviates from its cooperation with Washington and resumes inter-Korean economic projects such as the Kaesong industrial complex and Mt. Kumgang tourism project. Kim Jong-un’s letter implies that his April statement no longer strictly applies to North Korea’s relations with South Korea.

### **North Korea’s Intentions**

The unexpected and fluctuating message by the North Korean leader can be interpreted as a reflection of North Korea’s desperate desire to overcome domestic difficulties. Even though it is still puzzling why Kim Jong-un and Kim Yo-jong sent contrasting messages, as well as why Kim Jong-un’s letter did not include a specific demand toward South Korea for help in battling the coronavirus, it would not be an exaggeration to interpret Kim’s message as North Korea’s own way of asking for South Korea’s assistance.

Support from China is limited at least for a while because China has been hit hard by the coronavirus. Although its situation is showing improvements, China has begun blocking its border in order to prevent a reverse spread of the virus. Temporary relief from China for North Korea is possible, yet normalizing trade will take time. North Korea is also believed to have sent pleas for international help to UN International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Doctors Without Borders and the World Health Organization in early February. Some of these institutions have already sent personal protective gear and diagnostic equipment to North Korea after securing sanction exemptions.

However, North Korea needs more than temporary relief. For example, it is currently unable to secure the fertilizer it needs for rice farming typically at this time of the year due to closed borders. The lack of fertilizer and other necessary equipment needed for farming will likely lead to a food shortage in the coming months. Another ambitious plan by Kim Jong-un to expand the

tourism industry by building new sites such as the Wonsan beach and casino resort, Yandok hot spring resort, and Mt. Paekdu and Samjiyon tour cannot be executed for a considerable period of time because of the coronavirus.

These reasons highlight why North Korea needs South Korea's assistance. Even with severe criticism from North Korea such as being called an "impudent guy rare to be found," President Moon Jae-in has never given up his willingness to provide support to North Korea. In his new year's speech and press briefing, President Moon offered five cooperative projects for North Korea. Following the outbreak of the coronavirus, President Moon included cooperation for the prevention of epidemics on the list of projects to be conducted with North Korea. North Korea is likely to take up South Korea's offer to overcome current difficulties. However, as already seen in Kim Jong-un's letter, North Korea will not publicly ask South Korea for help. Instead, it is likely to accept South Korea's aid in an unwilling gesture, once offered the assistance.

### **Shifting Away from 'A Head-on Breakthrough' Line?**

It is important to acknowledge that North Korea's possible resumption of exchange with South Korea is not a fundamental shifting of its "a head-on breakthrough" line that the regime adopted last December. Rather, it is an attempt to execute its goal, which is to "break down the U.S. sanction blockade scheme."

The U.S. and UN Security Council already expressed their willingness to exempt coronavirus-related assistance to North Korea from sanctions. However, what North Korea has expected and South Korea has offered are highly likely to violate the sanctions. For example, South Korea suggested individual tour visits to North Korea. Despite the South Korean government's statement, and especially that by the Ministry of National Unification, that tourism will not violate existing sanctions, each step in the process of actualizing the inter-Korean tourism project can easily place South Korea and the U.S. in an awkward position. The U.S. already made it clear that tours to North Korea should be dealt with in the R.O.K-U.S. working group and stated more fundamentally that "the improvement of relations between North and South Korea cannot advance separately from resolving North Korea's nuclear program." However, the South Korean Ministry of National Unification continues to reiterate that tours to the North are not an issue that needs to be discussed with the U.S. It has also emphasized that peace process on the Korean peninsula can be resumed with improvements in inter-Korean relations.

There is a possibility that North Korea has caught the discord between South Korea and the U.S. and will try to decouple the alliance by accepting Seoul's offer. In other words, North Korea

may identify apparent disagreements between South Korea and the U.S. as an opportunity for carrying out “a head-on breakthrough” by weakening international sanctions.

As a result, even though North Korea has denied any confirmed cases of the coronavirus, there is high possibility that the virus has already permeated the country. The virus would aggravate an already devastated economy and kill thousands of unguarded North Koreans if it spreads throughout the whole country. This is a nightmare for North Korea, and especially for its regime security. Recent attitudes of North Korea such as scaling down provocations and sending a friendly letter to South Korea reflect the tension that the regime is already experiencing. While North Korea is likely to accept the international community’s assistance to prevent an outbreak, including that from South Korea, it does not necessarily mean that the regime has loosened its “head-on breakthrough” line. Rather, the acceptance of aid from South Korea could be interpreted as an attempt to execute the strategy. South Korea and the international community could certainly help North Korea in overcoming the coronavirus, but at the same time, should be very careful not to interrupt the sanctions regime for denuclearizing North Korea.

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