



Beijing and Washington Need a Joint Plan for North Korea's COVID-19 Disaster

Doug Bandow

June 2nd, 2022

As a COVID-19 wave engulfs North Korea, the question of reunification is moving to the fore. Tragically divided in the aftermath of World War II, the peninsula essentially suffered through a low-grade civil war in the decades since the Korean War ended.

Stitching together the two very different Koreas long looked improbable. However, North Korea is ill-prepared for a viral tsunami. Although it is premature to predict the Kim Jong Un dynasty's doom, it would be foolish not to prepare for the possibility.

North Korea is one of only two countries that made no effort to vaccinate its people. (Eritrea, oft called the North Korea of Africa, is the other.) North Koreans are at significant risk, having suffered through persistent malnutrition and occasional starvation. The country's health care system is decrepit, and its society is impoverished. The system might be at its most vulnerable ever: The regime effectively sanctioned itself by sealing its borders against COVID-19.

Although the extent of the infection in North Korea is unknown, Pyongyang admitted to hundreds of thousands of "fever cases" apparently contracted before emergency isolation orders were issued. (According to the Associated Press, Kim directed "a thorough lockdown of cities and counties and said workplaces should be isolated by units to block the virus from spreading.") If caused by the easily transmissible omicron variant, these numbers were expected to be merely the start. Although omicron is mild for those who are vaccinated, it can be deadly for the unvaccinated. And the North Korean health care system would be quickly overwhelmed by even a mild wave. Kim appears to have stumbled into a perfect storm, with catastrophe possible.

However, the regime soon declared that fever cases were down and that only 69 people had died due to COVID-19. Since the government was "successfully overcoming" the disease, Kim

partially ended Pyongyang's lockdown. These claims are improbable at best. In contrast, the World Health Organization's emergencies chief, Michael Ryan, yesterday stated, "We assume the situation is getting worse, not better."

Unfortunately, given the potential for disaster, the world should assume the worst. Obviously, help should be provided even though the time is too late to prevent an infectious wave. This should be unconditional, aimed purely at saving lives rather than seeking political leverage. South Korea has already offered aid but received no response. The United States, Japan, and China should also step forward. However, China itself is vulnerable, reliant on a zero-COVID policy while its home-produced vaccines offer only middling protection and its large elderly population lags in getting vaccinated. Beijing might hesitate to send anyone to North Korea, which would risk bringing the virus back home. Moreover, North Korea's dilapidated medical infrastructure makes mass vaccination and treatment difficult.

Pyongyang could face a crisis akin to the deadly famine it suffered from a quarter century ago, which killed prodigiously, with estimates running between 225,000 people and 3.5 million people. Indeed, North Korea is arguably in worse shape today, under much stricter sanctions, reinforced by its own border closure, and enforced by shoot-to-kill orders.

What if the pandemic overwhelms North Korea?

State authority ruptured during the famine when the government proved unable to feed its people. The situation could be much worse this time. Depending on who in authority has been vaccinated, important party cadres and leaders, security personnel, and senior military officers all might become sick or even die.

None of this is certain to happen. The regime survived the famine. And even dictators sometimes luck out. Nevertheless, the United States, South Korean, and Japan should begin systematic but quiet discussions about how to respond to North Korean instability and/or collapse. Even if this remains an outside possibility, it would be a crisis that could overwhelm the existing order in East Asia. And COVID-19 may well not be the only disaster to hit the north in an era of climate change and political uncertainty. There are many objectives, including meeting humanitarian needs; fostering peaceful transitions to a liberal, democratic order; and collecting weapons of mass destruction, especially nukes, as well as missiles and any other weapons posing significant danger to the surrounding people.

However, the overriding strategy, which would best achieve the rest, should be reunification. It would heal the post-World War II division, which was necessary to avoid a Korea united by communism under Soviet occupation (and ultimately, Moscow's appointee, Kim Il Sung). Uniting with South Korea would bring North Korea into an established democracy that has demonstrated resilience despite its relative youth. This process would provide the best path for economic development as well. Reunification would also facilitate disarmament and denuclearization, though Seoul's express commitment would be required, given popular support for acquiring nuclear weapons.

Reunification is far from a guaranteed outcome, however. Indeed, German reunification demonstrated the inevitable complex challenges that would face Koreans on both sides of the old border. South Korean enthusiasm for reunification flagged after seeing the cost reunification had on West Germany. A younger population with less connection to North Korea might be especially wary of taking on the added burden of a country ravaged by COVID-19. The new South Korean government should begin engaging civil society about the possibility and plan to meet likely contingencies.

The North Korean people's consent also would be necessary, of course, and should not be taken for granted. Local elites would lose their privileged positions—party officials who I've met over the years told FP they did not want their nation to be “swallowed.” Even those who've suffered the most from past misrule might be suspicious of a takeover from afar. Other powers would need to simultaneously defuse a crisis and treat a suffering people with respect. Issues of truth and reconciliation—balancing the harm done to North Korea's people by the regime with the need to find some role for officials and others who know how systems work—would be long and difficult.

The task would be easier if the allies united behind reunification. The joke among cynical observers is that many Japanese love Korea so much that they prefer to keep two of them. Although there is hope of better relations between the newly elected government in Seoul and Japan after years of bitterness caused by fights over historical issues, the latter still might be wary of a larger Korean neighbor seemingly united mostly by ancient antagonism toward Tokyo. The United States and South Korea should address Japanese concerns to ensure full cooperation.

Finally, it would be vital to engage Beijing. Fear of chaos, including mass refugee flows—it is easier to go north to China and cross the Yalu or Tumen Rivers than head south and get through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)—might incline Beijing to intervene to stabilize the country, if not the regime. Chinese analysts fear not only the humanitarian difficulties of coping with refugees but that an influx of Koreans could restart ethnic issues on the border. Even if it wasn't China's intent, Chinese involvement could end up preserving a separate North Korean state. A confrontation with South Korean and U.S. troops moving north from the DMZ would be dangerous. Open communication channels with Beijing would be especially important in a crisis.

More fundamentally, the Chinese have no desire to see a united Korea allied with the United States, hosting U.S. troops, and acting as part of an Asian containment system. China also might be concerned about preserving economic interests in North Korea. As a result, Beijing might act specifically to forestall reunification.

Winning Chinese assent to reunification, especially if China acted first in a crisis, might require concessions from the allies: for instance, a U.S. commitment to withdraw its troops, a South Korean promise of military neutrality, and/or a Japanese pledge to forgo formal military ties with Seoul. It's better to begin exploring such topics, however delicate, before a North Korean implosion.

Although the United States could not force reunification, it could help ensure the most favorable circumstances to encourage it. The U.S. State Department should organize three-way talks, including Japan, and prepare an approach to China.

In Washington everything is treated as urgent even when it is not. Preparing for a possible North Korean health emergency and even state collapse actually is urgent. Ultimate responsibility for implementing a new political order on the peninsula would lie with South Korea. But Washington would have its own part to play in the slow healing of a long divide.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of several books, including *Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World*.