



While Ukraine Dominates the News, North Korea Could Become the Next Great Crisis

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The war between Russia and Ukraine continues to dominate media headlines and Washington's attention. But an even bigger black swan event could be occurring. COVID-19 has breached North Korea's border defenses, forcing every city in the country into lockdown.

Although the Omicron variant is more infectious, it also is milder, which has allowed the US and other Western nations to move back toward normalcy. However, very few North Koreans have been vaccinated. Many are in poor health, having suffered from a lifetime of malnutrition and inadequate medical care. And the impoverished Democratic People's Republic of Korea has a correspondingly decrepit health care system. In the DPRK, Omicron could be a death sentence for thousands – and perhaps many more.

Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un is not a religious man, but prayer might be his best option today. Even China has not attempted a national shutdown, yet it possesses far greater resources, necessary to disinfect, protect, and isolate people, care for the sick and quarantined, and keep closed cities afloat.

In contrast, the North is on the economic edge and can barely feed itself in the best of times. If Omicron is loose, as suggested by the DPRK's announcement of hundreds of thousands of "fever" cases, it is too late to isolate the population. Worse, even if shutting industry and agriculture slowed the pandemic, doing so would wreck an economy already weakened by more than two years of isolation. The result could be another famine, akin to that of the late 1990s which killed at least a half million and by some estimates as many as three million North Koreans.

Kim reportedly called for "a thorough lockdown of cities and counties and said workplaces should be isolated by units to block the virus from spreading." Exactly how enterprises can remain open if their locations are under a "thorough lockdown" is unclear. Kim, who is now being pictured, like Russia's Vladimir Putin, sitting far away from his underlings, rightly warned of a "severe national emergency."

More important for the North's neighbors, the crisis could be regime-ending. Of course, the Kim dynasty has survived much before, including the famine a quarter century ago. It would be foolish to plan on the DPRK's demise. However, the North Korean system begins in a far weaker position today – having endured years of sanctions, suffered from more than two years of self-isolation, and retreated from domestic economic reforms.

The only positive for Pyongyang is a stronger relationship with China, which, given the latter's deteriorating relationship with America, is more likely to overlook accelerated missile tests and threatened nuclear test. However, even if Beijing is willing to keep the North Korean system afloat, is doing so possible? Accelerated food aid would have to be distributed to keep North Koreans from starving. Personal protective equipment, vaccines, and medicine must be put into people's hands amid a national quarantine. And the sick must be cared for – by a health care system that lacks everything, from infrastructure to personnel.

Would Kim break with family policy and allow a massive influx of foreigners to serve his people? Would China send logistics personnel, aid workers, and medical professionals into a COVID hotspot while confronting pandemic eruptions at home? Would sizable numbers of professionals from other countries be willing to risk their health in such a situation? If Omicron is already spreading, it might take a veritable miracle to stop it.

If the virus overwhelms, then what? Imagine if the pandemic takes out senior members of the leadership. Hits a substantial number of regime elites in cities, where the virus is more likely to spread. Sharply restricts activity by security forces. Sickens and/or kills substantial numbers of military personnel. What if official organizations stop functioning and even party leaders begin to panic amid dwindling food supplies? Imagine increasing numbers of North Koreans attempting to flee into China, perhaps *led by* border guards.

None of this will necessarily happen. But if it does, the entire North Korean system would be at risk. While superficially North Korea's collapse might seem to serve US interests, the human costs would be high and the potential impact on surrounding states equally serious. A weakened political leadership could lead to a power struggle. A weakened military chain of command could lead to a violent bid for control. Weakened social controls might lead to popular unrest and civil conflict. Medical disaster mixed with social instability could tempt both China and South Korea to intervene militarily.

If North Korea was, say, Switzerland, none of its neighbors would even notice a collapse since it would be so well-ordered. But the DPRK has a large, though antiquated conventional military; ever-growing missile arsenal, capable of targeting neighboring states and probably hitting, though with dubious accuracy, the US; and enough nuclear materials to make two or three score weapons, more than enough to kill millions of people. Government break-down, civil disorder, military clashes, and/or civil war could lead to a very bad day for a lot of people.

What to do? The US, South Korea, and Japan should join in a humanitarian initiative to the North offering to set aside politics and supply vaccines, medicine, PPE, and medical personnel to help stem and overcome the COVID threat. Although successful cooperation might yield

political benefits, the offer should be unconditional, without political restrictions. The focus should be forestalling a humanitarian catastrophe.

Washington and its allies also should immediately begin consultations with China over how to cooperate to meet the threat of a ruinous pandemic in the North. The PRC is at particular risk, since its COVID policy looks unsustainable, elderly population is undervaxxed, and home-grown vaccinations are under-performing. It is in the interest of all parties to ignore political differences in meeting the ongoing crisis. Success might make it easier to peacefully address other deeper, more divisive issues in the future.

Washington should immediately lift all travel restrictions on visiting the North. The latter is not currently allowing foreigners to enter, but that might change if the pandemic threatens to overwhelm North Korean government capabilities. The ban serves no useful purpose, having been imposed in late 2017 amid President Donald Trump's "fire and fury" phase to further isolate the North. US aid groups long have been frustrated by the US prohibition on even humanitarian visits. The Biden administration should sweep away this element of America's "hostile policy," especially with the North's potential need for extensive medical aid.

The administration also should encourage Pyongyang to exchange liaison offices. Washington should cite the imperative of the two nations having an open channel for communication. So far, Kim has refused to engage President Joe Biden despite the latter's entreaties. The administration should suggest that a moment of potentially great medical need is an appropriate moment to make it easier to talk in the future.

Washington should encourage South Korea to take the lead in dealing with the North, offering to adapt US policy, especially sanctions, to support Seoul overtures toward the DPRK. After the collapse of the 2019 Hanoi summit between Kim and Trump, the North essentially dismissed contact by the Republic of Korea with contempt. Unfortunately, the ROK had little to offer the North even though peace and stability on the peninsula matter much more to South Koreans than Americans. The DPRK should become Seoul's, not Washington's, problem.

Even more so, the US should begin shifting defense responsibilities to the South. With twice the population, more than 50 times the economy, a vast technological lead, and broad international support, the ROK should take over responsibility for its own security. That will become imperative if the North develops the ability to target American cities with nuclear weapons. Nothing in the South is worth the risk of bringing mass destruction and death to the US homeland.

Military disengagement was a sensible goal before the pandemic hit the DPRK with full force. With the North facing a potential crisis it is even more important for Seoul to begin doing what any serious state does, safeguard its people. The US is effectively bankrupt, with a couple hundred trillion dollars in unfunded liabilities and heading toward a debt-GDP ratio of 200 percent by mid-century. Yet Americans currently are expected to defend more than a score of wealthy European states, protect and/or transform multiple Mideast nations, defend several Asian allies, and confront the PRC. Washington should begin trimming defense commitments, making them a matter of security rather than charity.

North Korea has been called the Impossible State, an issue with no good options. A full-blown COVID epidemic also could turn it into the land of the dead – destroying the state and dynasty along the way. With unpredictable and potentially catastrophic consequences for everyone connected to it. The US should offer to help meet the North's medical needs while transferring responsibility for the South's security.

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