



## Online Series

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# COVID-19 and Inter-Korean Health Care Security Community

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One should take the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to recognize health care issue as something that could pose a common threat to human security for both Koreas. Inter-Korean health care cooperation should be activated in pressing areas, the foundation of which should be expanded into an inter-Korean health care security community. What is most urgent is medical aid to North Korea on the prevention of coronavirus. One should also consider establishing a tentatively named 'joint committee on inter-Korean health care' and installing a contact channel within Inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office in Gaesong. Inter-Korean health care cooperation could provide an opportunity to facilitate the overall areas of inter-Korean exchange and cooperation since it accompanies other related cooperative efforts, including on rivers and streams sharing inter-Korean borders, forest and ecology-environment, and border areas. This could impart a momentum to the government's initiative of turning the DMZ into an international peace zone. It could also make it possible to attract international organizations tasked with cross-border cooperation, such as issues of ecology-environment and virus to DMZ regions.

## COVID-19 and Crisis of Human Security

The coronavirus pandemic is laying bare the aspect of a new security crisis facing humanity. Humans are helpless in the face of a highly infectious coronavirus with the number of positive cases and death tolls surging globally. The cure for COVID-19 is not within our reach and humanity, which has been assured by modern civilization, is feeling an unprecedented sense of panic amidst global pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic is now going beyond the health care sector and spreading into a crisis of political, economic, and social arenas as a whole and its effects are magnifying. International airports and ports in a majority of countries are full of idle ships and aircraft and global businesses are struggling to keep afloat in production and distribution. Even the military, which is tasked with defending national security, is suspending military exercises.

Traditional security, such as war and armed conflict, has long been considered to be the biggest threat to humanity. The world is now practically experiencing a crisis of human security, which is a new threat to humanity as presented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1994. Human security is characterized by a drastic increase of the range of security going beyond the military sector, including human rights, social stability, democracy, environment, and health care. The COVID-19 crisis is emphatically demonstrating a new crisis of human security facing modern society.

## Importance of Transborder Cooperation

“Poverty is hierarchical, but smog is democratic” in the word of Ulrich Beck, the late eminent German sociologist, is an analogy to humanity’s inescapable exposure to new kinds of danger in modern society. If his words were to be applied to the current crisis, it could probably be turned into “The COVID-19 is democratic.” The current coronavirus crisis is bringing home the fact that the virus has no boundary or race. To this end, cross border cooperation is the most important imminent tasks to fight the virus that is posing a common threat to humanity as a whole.

Although every country is scrambling to close its doors in the midst of danger, it has increasingly become clear that there is no point in doing so. What humanity

needs to do right now is to combat the infectious disease with an embracing, cooperative attitude rather than opting for isolation. Instead of closing its doors, the Republic of Korea (ROK) has mobilized the medical capacities and all the national resources available for the prevention and the treatment of epidemics. Contrary to some countries that are reluctant to reveal the reality of the rapid spike of the virus, the ROK transparently released all the facts and informed the public. The world, initially weary of the ROK's approach, is now reevaluating its active preventive efforts and medical system. Foreign professional sport players who left South Korea at the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak are now returning to the ROK.

Even though there remains a controversy over the need to bar the influx of foreigners more actively at the early stage of the outbreak, it would have not been that easy to close the door altogether for a country like South Korea that heavily relies on exports for its economy. Given that the world economy is closely connected by a global value chain (GVC), one country's economic crisis has a far-reaching effect in every corner of the world. The world already witnessed such an impact during the financial crisis that wreaked havoc on the global economy. We should be reminded that international cooperation, not aid at the individual country level, was a key to resolving a crisis of such a global scale.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a sobering reminder that cross-border cooperation and joint efforts on the global level, not isolation, are needed to remove the common threats being posed to humanity. This is all the more true as countries that initially rushed to prohibit the entry of South Koreans are now witnessing a far worsening situation unfolding.

### **The Need for Inter-Korean Health Care Cooperation**

The area for improvement is that inter-Korean cooperation has been delayed, which is immediately needed in the fight against the COVID-19. North Korea's health care system is poor as indicated by Chairman Kim Jong Un at the ground-breaking ceremony of Pyongyang General Hospital on March 17, 2020 regrettably criticizing "a lack of fully-equipped, modernized health care facility even in the capital of the country." There is no way of knowing how many North Korean people are suffering from the coronavirus even though the North Korean authorities reported no confirmed

positive cases.

The nutritional status of North Korean people is dire, which is considered to be the fundamental necessity of the medical sector. Last year's estimates of five international organizations, including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) suggest that 12.2 million North Korean people, 47.8% of the entire population, suffered from malnutrition during 2016–2018. Economic Research Service (ERS) operating under United States Department of Agriculture estimated in the recently released report on March that the number of rice yield in North Korea will hit the lowest point this year since 1994. North Korea went through painful times of having massive fatalities precipitated by a severe famine in the mid-1990s. Nutritional problem will soon transpire into a health care crisis. The World Health Organization's 2019 report on tuberculosis indicates that North Korea has a roughly 20,000 death toll annually caused by tuberculosis.

It is not just the northern part of the Korean Peninsula that is under a health care risk. The dead bodies of wild boars infected by African Swine Fever (ASF) are continuously being discovered in adjacent border areas of the South Korean side, such as Pocheon, Yeoncheon, and Cheorwon. North Korean media has continued to report cases of ASF as well as Avian Influenza (AI). One should also pay attention to the outbreak of malaria cases particularly in border regions of the southern side, unlike other areas in the South. Pine wilt disease, which is lethal to pine trees, moves freely in and out of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL). Rivers and streams connecting the South and the North, such as Imjin River and Bukhan River, could act as a channel to spread water-borne infectious diseases.

The reality of North Korea's poor health care is also our own problem given the densely populated peninsula in small-sized territories. Neglecting the health care crisis of North Korea would mean incurring the astronomical health care cost at the time of unification in the future. Population integration is important not only in quantitative aspect but also in qualitative aspect. Inter-Korean cooperation is desperately needed considering that health care issues are not likely to be resolved with the effort of one side.

## Ways to Establish an Inter-Korean Health Care Security Community

One should take the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to recognize health care issue as something that could pose a common threat to human security for both Koreas and should establish a cooperative system to resolve this issue. Inter-Korean health care cooperation should be activated in pressing areas, including the COVID-19, the foundation of which should be expanded into an inter-Korean health care security community. National Community Unification Formula consists of a sequence as follows: seeking to create social and cultural community, economic community, and political community. The possibility of inter-Korean cooperation in the health care sector is the highest since this sector transcends ideology, system, and politics. The international community and the U.S. acknowledged the need for medical aid to North Korea as an exception to sanctions. As a first vice-department director of North Korea's Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party, Kim Yo Jong announced on March 22, the U.S. President Trump sent a letter to Chairman Kim Jong Un signaling a will for cooperation on the COVID-19 crisis. There needs to be renewed understanding on the need for inter-Korean joint health security along with the detailed measures on how to achieve it.

What is most urgent is medical aid to North Korea on the prevention of coronavirus. With all the factors considered, one cannot rule out the possibility of numerous confirmed coronavirus patients in the North. It is because even with many overseas workers returning home, the North Korean authorities only started to put returning workers in quarantine at the end of this January. It would not create a huge backfire in the sentiment of South Korean people if the ROK government would send surplus medical equipment, such as diagnostic kits. Masks, however, might be withheld since they are running out even domestically. One should think through the fact that President Moon Jae-in laid out a proposal for inter-Korean health care cooperation in his speech on March First Independence Movement Day this year and that North Korea has deferred an official response to it.

Measures should be crafted on how to create an inter-Korean joint cooperative body to eradicate the COVID-19 and to expand it into a permanent organization of the health care sector. Issues in the health care sector that are in need of inter-Korean joint efforts vary including ASF, AI, malaria, and Pine wilt disease, all of which require

continuous cooperation. Establishing a systematic and permanent system for medical aid to North Korea should be sought after given that North Korea's infectious diseases are prevalent, such as tuberculosis and hepatitis. To that end, one should consider establishing a tentatively named 'joint committee on inter-Korean health care' and installing a contact channel within Inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office in Gaesong.

Inter-Korean health care cooperation could provide an opportunity to facilitate the overall areas of inter-Korean exchange and cooperation since it accompanies other related cooperative efforts, including on rivers and streams sharing inter-Korean borders, forest and ecology·environment, and border areas. This could impart a momentum to the government's initiative of turning the DMZ into an international peace zone. It could also make it possible to attract international organizations tasked with cross-border cooperation, such as issues of ecology·environment and virus to DMZ regions. Since those areas of non-political nature—health care, forest and environment, and cooperation in border areas—could contribute to realizing increased human security, they are not likely to be in conflict with sanctions placed on North Korea.

The COVID-19 crisis requires a new kind of inter-Korean cooperation, which could be materialized into establishing an inter-Korean health care security community. Once the South and the North formulate an inter-Korean health care security community, it will not only drive the whole areas of inter-Korean exchange and cooperation, including society, culture, and economy, but also positively contribute to building military confidence. ©KINU 2020

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