

# North Korea's Response to Its COVID-19 Outbreak and the International Community's Support to North Korea

Soohwan Hwang  
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# 1

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## Introduction

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COVID-19 has plunged the world into a pandemic fear over the past three years since the first case was reported to have occurred in the second half of 2019. The end of the pandemic is still not in sight in 2023, but countries around the world have been shifting to a daily quarantine system from an emergency status. Most countries were able to have gradually returned to normal thanks to the maintenance and operation of transnational cooperation mechanisms to cope with COVID-19 pandemic.

On the other hand, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has stuck to self-reliant measures to respond to the pandemic, such as blockage, shutdown and control, instead of cooperating with the international community. North Korea had never confirmed a COVID infection until May 12, 2022 for two years during which the world had grappled with the pandemic. On August 10, 2022, North Korea declared a victory over the virus<sup>1)</sup> by lowering the level of maximum emergency epidemic prevention system to a normal level during a National Emergency Quarantine Conference. As discussed, North Korea has taken a different path from countries around the world in fighting COVID-19, which are currently bracing for the post-pandemic era through cooperation and support.

This paper is largely divided into three parts: 1) cases of cooperation between the DPRK and the international community on health issues; 2) perceptions and responses of the DPRK and the international community on COVID-19; and 3) the

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<sup>1)</sup> "Let's guarantee more reliably the safety of the state and the people by building on the successes we have achieved in the Anti-epidemic War - Respected Comrade Kim Jong-un's Speech at National Meeting of Reviewing Emergency Anti-Epidemic Work: August 10, *Juche* 111 (2022)," *Rodong Sinmun*, August 11, 2022, p. 2-4.

international community's offers for cooperation to the DPRK and the DPRK's response thereof.

# 2

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## Cases of the International Community's Cooperation with the DPRK on Health Issues

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## **A. Cooperation with and Support for the DPRK related to General Health Issues**

The World Health Organization (WHO) can be said to be the most representative organization that promotes cooperation with and support for North Korea on health issues.<sup>2)</sup> The WHO provides a significant amount of technical, material, and financial support to the DPRK in relation to health issues. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has also continued to collaborate with and provide support for North Korea either on its own or in collaboration with the WHO and other organizations. In particular, UNICEF has focused on promoting the health of children under five and mothers in North Korea and provided assistance to this end.<sup>3)</sup> The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (Gavi) has focused its support for the DPRK on increasing the vaccination rate in the country. In particular, working closely with the WHO and UNICEF, Gavi has provided various forms of financial and institutional support to North Korea with a view to helping the country strengthen its immunization systems, enhancing immunization of children under five and establishing the cold chain system since 2001.<sup>4)</sup>

Countries such as Switzerland, Sweden, Canada, Norway, Germany, and Finland in addition to South Korea have continued

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2) WHO, "WHO Country Cooperation Strategy Democratic People's Republic of Korea: 2014-2019," World Health Organization, p. 25, <<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/250298>> (Accessed July 22, 2022).

3) UNICEF, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Health," <<https://www.unicef.org/dprk/health>> (Accessed July 23, 2022).

4) GAVI, "DPR Korea introduces pentavalent vaccine," <<https://www.gavi.org/news/media-room/dpr-korea-introduces-pentavalent-vaccine>> (Accessed July 25, 2022).

to provide financial support to North Korea for humanitarian purposes. The European Union (EU) is currently offering aid to North Korea through the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Civil Aid Operations, and international organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP).

Non-governmental organizations are also joining hands to assist the North from humanitarian perspectives. Organizations such as the World Vision, the America Friends Service Committee, the Eugene Bell Foundation, and the Korean Sharing Movement (KSM) are currently offering direct assistance to the DPRK through partnerships with North Korean institutions.

### ***1) Evaluation of the International Community's Cooperation with the DPRK on General Health Issues***

Compared to the international community's support for countries with the similar economic level to North Korea, health support for North Korea has been given relatively in a limited scope. There are mainly three reasons for such a limited scope of humanitarian support for North Korea in general health issues.<sup>5)</sup> The first reason is related to the lack of transparency of North Korean authorities. There is no way to verify that humanitarian supplies such as medicines and medical equipment provided to

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<sup>5)</sup> Esteban & Pacheco-Pardo, "Public health in Korea and Europe: contemporary challenges and possibilities for cooperation," *Korean Foundation Working Paper*, 02/2021, (July 2021), <<https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/wp02-2021-esteban-pachecopardo-public-health-in-korea-and-europe-contemporary-challenges-and-possibilities-for-cooperation.pdf>> (Accessed April 15, 2022).

North Korea have been properly delivered to its people, and not used for other purposes such as trading at black markets or supporting the military. The second reason is North Korean authorities' fundamental distrust of the West and international organizations. North Korea basically does not trust Western countries, and is often suspicious and wary of the purpose or sincerity of their aid offer, which makes it difficult to discuss the possibility of offering assistance to the North in the first place. The third reason is the effect of sanctions on North Korea. The prolonged sanctions on North Korea for its nuclear programs have hindered individual countries from providing aid to North Korea.

## ***B. Cooperation with and Support for the DPRK related to Novel Viruses and Infectious Diseases***

### ***1) Malaria***

In order to assist North Korea in coping with malaria, the South Korean government has provided various forms of financial, technical and commodity aid to the North. South Korea's anti-malaria programs for North Korea began in the early 2000s, through which it supported \$490,000 in 2001, \$620,000 in 2002, and \$700,000 in 2003.<sup>6)</sup> The WHO established a disease-specific strategic plan and provided response mechanisms to North Korea to help bolster its capacity for preparedness and response to communicable diseases and re-emerging infectious diseases,

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<sup>6)</sup> "South Korea announced to send \$700,000 in anti-malaria aid to North Korea," *Akomnews*, April 28, 2004, <[https://www.akomnews.com/bbs/board.php?bo\\_table=news&wr\\_id=1115&page=1732&device=pc](https://www.akomnews.com/bbs/board.php?bo_table=news&wr_id=1115&page=1732&device=pc)> (Accessed June 5, 2022).



including malaria.<sup>7)</sup>

## 2) H1N1

The influenza A (H1N1) virus originated from animal influenza viruses. After early reports of influenza outbreaks in North America in April 2009, the new influenza virus spread rapidly around between April 2009 and August 2010.<sup>8)</sup> As the situation related to the H1N1 virus worsened in North Korea during this period, North Korea officially requested aid from the international community for the first time related to novel viruses and epidemic crises. The North belatedly but unusually acknowledged having a pandemic H1N1 outbreak for the first time to the international community and requested medical supplies.<sup>9)</sup>

Amid the continued circulation of the H1N1 virus, then-South Korean President Lee Myung-bak gave an order to send medical aid to North Korea to help stem the spread of H1N1 in the country on December 8, 2009.<sup>10)</sup> On the following day, North Korea, which reportedly lacked proper treatments in a poor healthcare environment, requested support from South Korea and the

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7) WHO, "WHO Country Cooperation Strategy Democratic People's Republic of Korea: 2014-2019," World Health Organization, p. 9, <<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/250298>> (Accessed July 22, 2022).

8) WHO, "Influenza A (H1N1) pandemic 2009 – 2010," <[https://www.who.int/emergencies/situations/influenza-a-\(h1n1\)-outbreak](https://www.who.int/emergencies/situations/influenza-a-(h1n1)-outbreak)> (Accessed August 05, 2022).

9) "North Korea confirmed nine cases of influenza A (H1N1)," *Newdaily*, December 9, 2009, <<https://www.newdaily.co.kr/site/data/html/2009/12/09/2009120900002.html>> (Accessed August 8, 2022).

10) "Will South Korea's H1N1 medical aid to help North Korea revive the momentum for inter-Korean dialogue?," *The Korean Economic Daily*, December 9, 2009.

international community. Upon this request, the South Korean Ministry of Unification promptly came up with measures to provide the North with Tamiflu and other anti-viral drugs, and sought contact with North Korean authorities to this end.<sup>11)</sup> The North expressed its intention to accept South Korea's aid through a communication channel at the truce village of *Panmunjeom*, and the South Korean government then decided to offer North Korea with 500,000 doses of anti-viral drugs.<sup>12)</sup> In the late 2000s when the H1N1 virus was prevalent, it is evaluated that inter-Korean relations turned seriously strained.

### 3) *Ebola*

Ebola, which is a type of viral hemorrhagic fever, is an acute viral illness causing hemorrhagic fever by the infection of Ebola virus.<sup>13)</sup> From 2014 to 2016 when the Ebola virus spread internationally, the DPRK strived to block the inflow of the virus by banning the entry of foreigners into the country. Any specific aid offer has not been confirmed, but it appeared that several countries expressed their willingness to provide aid to the DPRK. At North Korea's request, South Korea provided North Korea with expensive quarantine equipment to use in the Kaesong industrial complex free of charge to help detect anyone showing symptoms of

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11) "North Korea officially confirmed the outbreak of H1N1...The government devises support measures," *MBC*, December 9, 2009.

12) "North Korea has accepted South Korea's offer to provide H1N1 treatments," *Macil Business News Korea*, December 10, 2009, <<https://mk.co.kr/news/politics/view/2009/12/637534/>> (Accessed June 7, 2022).

13) Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, "List of infectious diseases – Ebola virus" <<http://xn--now-po7lf48dlsm0ya109f.kr/nqs/oidnow/infect/precaution.do>> (Accessed August 26, 2022).

the disease in November 2014.<sup>14)</sup> However, it appears that the international community's support for North Korea on the Ebola virus was granted in a very limited scope.

#### 4) MERS

Since the first case was reported in Saudi Arabia in the Middle East in 2012, the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) has still persisted in various regions. In 2015 when MERS circulated around the world, the DPRK imposed rigid lockdown measures to prevent the spread of MERS out of considerable concern. Under these circumstances, there was no reported case of support for North Korea from international organizations related to MERS. However, the DPRK reportedly asked South Korea for various protective equipment such as thermal scanners and face masks to curb the spread of MERS in the country during the MERS pandemic.<sup>15)</sup>

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<sup>14)</sup> "The government announced to install three thermal scanners at Kaesong Industrial Complex to detect the Ebola virus," *Aju Business Daily*, November 11, 2014, <<https://www.ajunews.com/view/20141111112503355>> (Accessed June 5, 2022).

<sup>15)</sup> "North Korea's two faces in its fight against MERS," *Sisaweek*, June 16, 2015, <<http://www.sisaweek.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=45680>> (Accessed June 6, 2022).

# 3

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## Response to COVID-19 by the International Community and the DPRK

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## **A. The International Community's Response to COVID-19**

Compared to the previous outbreak of novel viruses, COVID-19 is said to be unprecedented in terms of the speed and scope of its spread and the extent of damage that it has caused. Although COVID-19 has recently subsided with its damage diminishing, it seems that more time is needed before the virus is completely gone although it has already been three years since its first outbreak in 2019.

In order to cope with this transnational crisis, the international community devised response measures by stressing the importance of international cooperation and partnership related to vaccines and medicine. To tackle the virus, the international community has accordingly engaged in cross-border cooperation including the supply of vaccines and medicine. Response to infectious diseases is one of the key pillars of international cooperation on health issues, and new vaccine have been developed based on Gavi.<sup>16)</sup> In particular, the newly developed vaccines were supplied through the COVAX Facility in response to COVID-19.<sup>17)</sup>

## **B. The DPRK's Response to COVID-19**

By the time when the global spread of COVID-19 began in earnest, North Korea set out to respond to the pandemic strongly and preemptively, and imposed strict border blockade and control measures by declaring a state of emergency. North Korea officially

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<sup>16)</sup> Gavi, <<https://www.gavi.org>> (Accessed April 22, 2022).

<sup>17)</sup> WHO, "COVAX," <<https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/covax>> (Accessed April 02, 2022).

acknowledged the outbreak of COVID-19 in the country for the first time on May 12, 2022, announcing that more than 18,000 fever patients occurred.<sup>18)</sup> North Korea reported 393,920 new fever cases on May 16, posting the maximum daily occurrence.

Recognizing the spread of COVID-19 as a crisis of national importance, North Korea activated the maximum emergency epidemic prevention system to mobilize its all-out and full-scale response capabilities. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un called North Korea's first COVID-19 outbreak "a major national emergency since its foundation," and vowed to focus all possible capabilities to get the COVID-19 crisis under control.<sup>19)</sup> He then declared victory in the battle against COVID-19 and ordered an easing of its maximum anti-epidemic measures to a normal level at a national emergency quarantine meeting on August 10, 2022.<sup>20)</sup> It was only three months after North Korea officially reported its first confirmed COVID-19 case.

North Korea also refined related laws since the outbreak of COVID-19. When the virus struck the world in 2020, North Korea revised the Law on Prevention of Infectious Diseases and enacted the Emergency Quarantine Law. The DPRK then amended healthcare-related laws including the Emergency Quarantine Law

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<sup>18)</sup> "Respected Comrade Kim Jong-un visited the National Emergency Quarantine Command to inspect the state of emergency quarantine situation across the country," *Rodong Sinmun*, May 13, 2022, p. 1.

<sup>19)</sup> "Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea holds a meeting," *Rodong Sinmun*, May 14, 2022, p. 1.

<sup>20)</sup> "Let's ensure more reliably the safety of the state and the people by building on the successes we have achieved in the Anti-epidemic War - Respected Comrade Kim Jong-un's Speech at National Meeting of Reviewing Emergency Anti-Epidemic Work: August 10, *Juche* 111 (2022)," *Rodong Sinmun*, August 11, 2022, p. 2-4.

and the Medical Appraisal Act in May 2022. At the 22nd Plenary Meeting of the 14th Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK held on October 6, 2022, the DPRK enacted the Law on Emergency Response to provide instructions on setting up systems and directions to swiftly cope with emergency crises in areas such as health and natural disasters.<sup>21)</sup>

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21) "The 22<sup>nd</sup> Plenary Meeting of the 14<sup>th</sup> Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK was held," *Rodong Sinmun*, October 6, 2022, p. 1.





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## Cooperation between the International Community and the DPRK on COVID-19

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## **A. The Trends of the International Community's Offers for Cooperation to the DPRK**

### **1) The International Community's Offers for Cooperation to the DPRK**

From the time when the COVID-19 pandemic began in earnest to the early 2022 when North Korean authorities officially admitted to the first outbreak in the country, the international community expressed its intention to provide various forms of aid to North Korea. Among other organizations, the WHO is a representative organization that delivered its intention to provide vaccines and medical supplies to North Korea. The WHO and Gavi allocated 1.9 million doses of vaccine, mainly AstraZeneca vaccine, to North Korea in March 2021.<sup>22)</sup> However, the delivery was not implemented due to the inadequate preparation procedures by COVAX, and North Korea's concerns over the potential side-effects of AstraZeneca vaccine, as well as requirements made by COVAX.<sup>23)</sup> Six months later in September 2021, the WHO and Gavi earmarked 2.97 million doses of China's Sinovac vaccine to North Korea.<sup>24)</sup> However, the North Korean Ministry of Public Health turned down this offer, saying to the UNICEF that they may need to be sent to severely affected countries.<sup>25)</sup>

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<sup>22)</sup> "China's Sinovac vaccines are rejected by North Korea... "We give them up for other countries", " *The Chosun Ilbo*, September 1, 2021, <[https://biz.chosun.com/policy/politics/2021/09/01/6U3UUG6MY5DKJMLEFGKSB62P5Q/?utm\\_source=naver&utm\\_medium=original&utm\\_campaign=biz](https://biz.chosun.com/policy/politics/2021/09/01/6U3UUG6MY5DKJMLEFGKSB62P5Q/?utm_source=naver&utm_medium=original&utm_campaign=biz)> (Accessed May 31, 2022).

<sup>23)</sup> Dong Jin Kim and Andrew Inkhun Kim, "Global Health Diplomacy and North Korea in the COVID-19 Era," *International Affairs*, vol 98, issue 3 (2022), p. 925.

<sup>24)</sup> "China's Sinovac vaccines are even rejected by North Korea... "We give them up for other countries", " *The Chosun Ilbo*, September 1, 2021.

The WTO's various aid offers to the DPRK continued after North Korea declared severe national emergency upon its first outbreak of COVID-19 in May 2022. Although details of its aid offers have not been revealed, the media reported that the WHO provided North Korea with medicines and medical support including three rounds of vaccine shipments.<sup>26)</sup>

## *2) Offers for Cooperation to the DPRK at the National Level*

The South Korean government has also continuously expressed its willingness to assist the North related to COVID-19.<sup>27)</sup> Former South Korean President Moon Jae-in said that South Korea was willing to provide COVID-19 vaccine aid to North Korea in June 2021. In addition to providing vaccines, he also expressed his willingness to assist North Korea on COVID-19 quarantine equipment, medical tools or response mechanisms.<sup>28)</sup> When North

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<sup>25)</sup> *ibid.*; “Why did North Korea ‘give up’ vaccines for other countries,” *News1*, September 2, 2021, <[https://www.news1.kr/articles/?4422483;%20https://biz.chosun.com/policy/politics/2021/09/01/6U3UUG6MY5DKJMLEFGKSB62P5Q/?utm\\_source=naver&utm\\_medium=original&utm\\_campaign=biz](https://www.news1.kr/articles/?4422483;%20https://biz.chosun.com/policy/politics/2021/09/01/6U3UUG6MY5DKJMLEFGKSB62P5Q/?utm_source=naver&utm_medium=original&utm_campaign=biz)> (Accessed May 31, 2022).

<sup>26)</sup> Shweta Sharma, “WHO says North Korea’s Covid outbreak is likely getting worse,” *Independent*, June 2, 2022, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/independentpremium/world/north-korea-covid-cases-who-b2092910.html>> (Accessed August 27, 2022).

<sup>27)</sup> “South Korea willing to provide COVID vaccines to North Korea, says Moon Jae-in,” *NK News*, June 14, 2021, <<https://www.nknews.org/2021/06/south-korea-willing-to-provide-covid-vaccines-to-north-korea-says-moon-jae-in/>> (Accessed May 31, 2022).

<sup>28)</sup> “Vaccine aid to North Korea? In-young Lee said, “Only when we have spare vaccines after sufficiently vaccinating the South Korean people,” *The Hankook Ilbo*, November 4, 2021, <<https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2021110410330003086?did=NA>> (Accessed May 30, 2022).

Korea confirmed its first outbreak of COVID-19 in May 2022, the South Korean government announced that it is willing to promote cooperation more proactively with North Korea on vaccine supplies. President Yoon Suk Yeol offered medical aid to North Korea under the principle of separating humanitarian issues from political issues, and set a policy direction that he will spare no effort to help North Korea cope with a massive outbreak of COVID-19 if Pyongyang agrees to accept them.<sup>29)</sup>

The US did not make a separate plan to provide COVID-19 vaccines to North Korea when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a global issue. The US shared the view that vaccine aid for the North is necessary from a humanitarian perspective even amid its worsening relationship with the DPRK, but the US did not go any further than expressing its support for the provision of COVID-19 vaccines to North Korea.<sup>30)</sup>

China is known to have provided COVID-19 support to North Korea through official and unofficial routes. From 2019 to 2021, China assisted North Korea with medical supplies at the government level. When the first COVID-19 case was confirmed by North Korea in May 2022, a Chinese delegation of medical experts were reportedly sent to North Korea to advise on COVID-19 quarantine measures, technologies, and experiences.<sup>31)</sup>

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29) "President Yoon, keen on providing COVID-19 vaccine aid to North Korea... "We plan to discuss this matter with North Korea", " *Yonhap News Agency*, May 13, 2022, <<https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220513098900001?input=1195m>> (Accessed June 2, 2022).

30) "US supports the provision of COVID-19 vaccine to N. Korea," *The Korea Herald*, June 15, 2021, <<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20210615000226>> (Accessed May 31, 2022).

31) "Chinese medical experts in North Korea to advise on COVID response," *Radio Free Asia*, May 24, 2022, <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/covid-0524>>

Russia also announced that it will promptly provide its Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccines upon any requests from the DPRK.<sup>32)</sup>

## ***B. The DPRK's Response to the International Community's Offers for Cooperation***

### ***1) The Current Status of Cooperation between the DPRK and the International Community***

First, when COVID-19 broke out and circulated across the world in 2020, prompting countries to close their borders, North Korea did not seem to have considered inter-Korean and international cooperation at all out of extreme fear over the inflow of COVID-19.

Second, when COVID-19 vaccine development and vaccination began around the world in early 2021, North Korea sought cooperation with the outside world by reaching out to COVAX or others for potential cooperation. North Korea has joined the WHO's efforts to track countries' COVID-19 situations and share information. It has also coordinated with Gavi by submitting an application to receive COVID-19 vaccines in January 2021, and carrying out necessary administrative procedures. However, there was no actual vaccine support by Gavi as negotiations between North Korea and COVAX did not make progress.

Third, since North Korea declared the end of COVID-19 in

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202212124.html> (Accessed June 02, 2022).

32) "Russia would consider North Korea's request for COVID vaccine supply," *Reuters*, May 13, 2022, <<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/russia-would-consider-north-korea-request-covid-vaccine-supply-2022-05-13/>> (Accessed August 12, 2022).

August 2022, its cross-border freight train operations with China have resumed. North Korea also reportedly received COVID-19 supplies and medicines from China, but the DPRK-China cooperation in response to COVID-19 had only been informal and intermittent. Since North Korea declared victory over COVID-19 in August 2022, it has sought the possibility of cooperation with the international community based on its self-reliance stance in the fight against the virus, but this attempt has not succeeded.

In short, North Korea has officially maintained its stance to overcome COVID-19 on its own without cooperation with the outside world up until now in 2023 since it first closed its border in an attempt to curb the spread of COVID-19 in January 2020.

## ***2) Reasons behind Failed Cooperation between the DPRK and the International Community***

First, North Korea might not have been ready to vaccinate its people. In other words, even if vaccine supplies are provided, the North appears to have thought that it may not be able to effectively deal with the virus given its internal capabilities.

Second, there is a possibility that North Korea preferred certain vaccines over others. COVAX assigned China's Sinovac and AstraZeneca vaccines to North Korea, but the North reportedly requested Pfizer and Moderna vaccine for the sake of safety.<sup>33)</sup>

Third, COVID-19 coordination might not have played out due to a lack of facilities and technical issues in North Korea. Experts

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<sup>33)</sup> "North Korea: COVAX to assign additional 4.73 million doses of AstraZeneca vaccine to North Korea...Will it receive them this time?," *BBC*, <<https://www.bbc.com/korean/news-59399334>> (Accessed April 15, 2022).



say that North Korea itself was not technically ready to receive support for certain vaccines prior to requests for the vaccine. In addition, the absence of large general hospitals in North Korea with medical equipment to treat COVID-19 seems to have been one of the issues.

Fourth, North Korea refused to accept aid offer out of concerns that such offer may have a political intention related to its human rights issues. Some view that the biggest reason why North Korea did not receive vaccine aid is its suspicion that the US and the international community may politically weaponize their vaccine support. For example, North Korea rejected the US offer for vaccine support, speculating a political intention behind this proposal to connect vaccine aid with human rights issues.

Fifth, North Korea might have felt political burden about monitoring by the international community after it provides vaccines to the North. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, such monitoring is highly likely to expose North Korea's vulnerable situation, and this concern might have caused political burden for the DPRK.

Sixth, North Korea might have been suspicious over the effectiveness of existing vaccines due to the emergence of new COVID-19 variants such as Omicron and Delta variants.

It can be analyzed that multiple factors discussed above played a role in hindering effective cooperation between the North and the international community in the fight against COVID-19.

# 5

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## Conclusion

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Although the international community has continued to propose cooperation and aid related to COVID-19 to North Korea, the hermit kingdom has never accepted the offer for coordination. In fact, efforts have been underway between North Korea and the international community to jointly combat COVID-19, but actual cooperation related to COVID-19 vaccines and treatments has not been realized. However, it is worth noting that the process to pursue cooperation has taken place, and it is only that such efforts have not led to tangible outcomes. Comprehensively taking into account these circumstances, this paper suggests policy options for the South Korean government to take to cooperate with the North on health issues including COVID-19 and other infectious diseases, and implications thereof.

First, South Korea needs to establish an inter-Korean joint response mechanism to combat infectious diseases. Located in the closest vicinity of North Korea, South Korea is of great need to proactively pursue joint quarantine and response measures with its northern neighbor.

Second, South Korea needs to devise measures to exempt medical supplies for infectious diseases from sanctions for the sake of joint inter-Korean responses to infectious diseases. In the event of a pandemic outbreak, it is necessary for South Korea to proactively review sanctions exemptions to take initial response measures and pursue coordination to prevent the spread of infectious diseases to the extent that such attempts do not undermine the purpose of sanctions imposed on North Korea.

Third, South Korea needs to propose selective support to North Korea for those vulnerable to infectious diseases, particularly for the elderly aged 65 or older, children under five, and patients with

existing conditions.

Fourth, it is important for South Korea to refrain from linking cooperation on health issues to other political issues. North Korea strongly condemned the US when the US tried to link its COVID-19 aid to North Korean human rights issues. With a view to increasing the possibility that North Korea accepts aid offer, it is necessary to devise measures to pursue cooperation in a consistent and continuous manner in areas limited to health issues, rather than seeking political discussions.

Fifth, if North Korea continues to refuse direct dialogue and cooperation with South Korea due to strained inter-Korean relations, South Korea needs to come up with measures to take indirect routes such as using international organizations and NGOs. It may be helpful to properly utilize UN agencies and private organizations operating inside North Korea.

# North Korea's Response to Its COVID-19 Outbreak and the International Community's Support to North Korea

