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THE CORONAVIRUS AND ITS LIKELY IMPACT ON NORTH KOREA

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Abstract

Despite Pyongyang's denials, available evidence suggests a high likelihood of the coronavirus outbreak in North Korea. Given North Korea's nuclear challenge, it is worth trying to explore how it might affect the country's internal politics and external actions. Based on the official statements and foreign policies of North Korea observed in 2020, I argue that the pandemic does not seem to pose an immediate threat to Kim Jong-un in the short term. Still, Kim is most likely to be concerned about the outbreak's secondary effects on the economy and regime legitimacy in the medium term. Then Kim's perception of crisis may well cause North Korea's external behavior to swing between military provocation and diplomatic engagement more frequently than before.

1. Introduction

While the COVID-19 spreads globally, North Korea claims that it has zero cases of the novel virus. But experts doubt it, and

Key Points:

- Available evidence suggests a high likelihood of the coronavirus outbreak in North Korea.
- Pandemic does not seem to pose an immediate threat to Kim Jong-un in the short term. Still, Kim is most likely to be concerned about the outbreak's secondary effects on the economy.
- North Korea's external behavior will swing more frequently between provocation and engagement.

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no country seems to take it seriously.¹ Given North Korea's nuclear challenges, this begs the questions of (1) whether there is already an outbreak in North Korea, (2) if so, how it impacts the domestic politics, and (3) how the epidemic would affect North Korea's external behavior and its approach to the nuclear negotiation with the United States.

With particularly limited access to the information inside the country, any analysts dealing with North Korea has to somehow "guess" to fill the gaps in their analyses, hoping that their guess is informed one and close to the truth. One way to minimize the risk of "guessing too much" is to focus on the facts of what the authorities in North Korea have said and done, and draw the implications in the most conservative way, instead of relying on rumors from unverified sources and judging with too much imagination.² Next, any analytic judgment about North Korea should be expressed in a probabilistic manner; when it comes to North Korea, one can only say that event A is more likely to happen than event B. This approach is consistent with the principle of parsimony: the simpler the theory is, the higher probabilities it has.³

Based on this analytic approach, I argue that there is a higher likelihood of the coronavirus outbreak in North Korea than otherwise. The epidemic does not seem to pose an immediate threat to Kim Jong-un in the short term. Still, he is most likely to be concerned about the outbreak's secondary effects on the economy and regime legitimacy in the medium term. Then Kim's perception of crisis is most likely to swing North Korea's external behavior between military provocation and diplomatic engagement more frequently than before, which opens a strategic opportunity for Washington and other stakeholders to engage with Pyongyang effectively.

The objective of this article is to explain how the COVID-19 is likely to impact North Korea's domestic politics and foreign policy behavior by examining the official statements, and foreign policies of North Korea observed in 2020. The analysis herein compares the future of the current crisis with North Korea's past crises and put it in the context of North Korea's recent record of military provocations. This article starts with assessing the likelihood of the coronavirus outbreak in North Korea, followed by its likely impacts on domestic politics and foreign policy. It concludes by discussing the policy implications of the analysis.

2. The High Possibility of COVID-19 Outbreak in North Korea

Pyongyang has repeatedly been claiming that the country has zero cases of coronavirus since it closed the border with China on January 23, 2020. The North Korean government claims that it has carried out strict containment measures, thoroughly inspecting all the personnel entering the country and disinfecting all goods.⁴ Regarding the success in preventing the virus spread, Pyongyang credits its rigorous measures, such as restricting domestic travel by local populations and closing the school system.⁵ The North Korean government has informed the World Health Organization (WHO) that, as of April 2, North Korea has tested 709 people but found no COVID-19

case, which makes North Korea as one of only four countries that report zero cases in the world, along with Lesotho, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Yemen.⁶

Despite North Korean official's repeated denials, their actions suggest that the government is likely responding to an outbreak of some size. North Korean state media has reported, for example, that the government placed approximately 7,000 people under medical monitoring for apparently showing the symptoms of the coronavirus.⁷ Likewise, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Russia had provided North Korea with 1,500 kits designed for the rapid diagnosis of the coronavirus on February 26.⁸ These measures suggest that North Korea itself does suspect an outbreak but lack the methods to confirm it. Then there is a higher likelihood that even Pyongyang does not have a full grasp of the true scale of the COVID-19 within North Korea than otherwise.

There are two additional factors, at the least, that significantly increase the likelihood of an outbreak within North Korea. First, North Korea shares a 1,450 km-long porous border with virus-hit China. The COVID-19 started to circulate in China from mid-November 2019, and tens of thousands of people had already crossed the border by the time when North Korea closed it on January 23, 2020.⁹ Given that there were already many confirmed cases within China by mid-January, it is highly probable that the virus already made its way to North Korea before the border closure. Secondly, there is the problem of poor public health infrastructure. It has been widely reported that 43% of the North Korean population suffers from malnutrition, and many lack access to drinkable water or sanitary facilities; North Korea was ranked 193 out of 195 countries in the World Sanitary Index 2019, ahead of only Somalia and Equatorial Guinea.¹⁰ The chronic lack of medical supplies, including facial masks, and poor health care infrastructure for a population already suffering from malnutrition makes North Korea uniquely vulnerable to COVID-19.¹¹

Considered together with these favorable conditions for the virus spread, the gap between what Pyongyang has said and done about COVID-19 suggests a high likelihood that the coronavirus has already arrived in North Korea.

3. The COVID-19 and its Likely Impact on the Domestic Politics of North Korea

Even if one assumes with a high level of confidence that there must be people dying from the coronavirus in North Korea, certainly, it is not the first time that the Kim family regime is faced with such a crisis. The Kim family regime has survived the tragedy of the great famine from 1996 to 2000, widely known as the March of Suffering. During this period, an estimated one to three million people died in North Korea.¹² Even if one picks the small end of the estimate, the number of deaths during the famine in North Korea only is five-time larger than the total deaths of coronavirus in the entire world at this time of writing.¹³ Yet, the Kim family regime survived without any signs of large-scale resistance from the North Korean society.¹⁴ North Korea also emerged from the 2003 SARS and 2014 Ebola epidemics unscathed.¹⁵ Given these past records, the coronavirus is not likely to pose a direct threat to the Kim Jong-un regime no matter how many people die from the disease.

The low probability of popular uprising triggered by the public health crisis, however, does not mean that Kim Jong-un has nothing to worry about. On the contrary, it is still highly probable that Kim Jong-un is concerned about the economic damage caused by the health crisis. In the past disasters of the great famine, SARS, and Ebola epidemics, North Korean people could still engage in economic activities, and illegal markets continued to expand across the country. This time is different. The coronavirus is most likely to shrink North Korean people's commercial activities, even reducing the size of smuggling through illegal markets.¹⁶ The COVID-19 also contributes to severely diminishing trades between North Korea and China. According to the data released from Chinese Customs, North Korea's exports to China in January and February in 2020 dropped 74 percent to only \$10 million.¹⁷ The COVID-19 also has damaging impacts on the economies of China and other developed countries on a global scale. The slow economic recovery of other countries would have a more severe effect on North Korea than the previous cases of public health crises, further weakening the North Korean economy.¹⁸

Then the coronavirus outbreak has the potential to increase political instability in North Korea. The economic downturn, accelerated by the epidemic, will inevitably hit hard the newly emerged-middle class so-called "donju", as well as political elites in Pyongyang, and Kim Jong-un has good reasons to worry about such possibility. Even though Kim Jong-un is a dictator enjoying nearly absolute authority, he is not immune to domestic politics: his power depends on the support of "winning coalition" – elites in the Worker's Party, the military, the intelligence services, and recently added "donju" class.¹⁹ Kim Jong-un may ignore the hardships of the general populace as long as he can satisfy the relatively affluent lifestyle of the elites in Pyongyang, to secure their loyalty.²⁰ However, the negative impacts of COVID-19 on the North Korean economy may expand widely and last long enough to prevent Kim Jong-un from extracting resources to maintain the elite class' loyalty. Frustrated with Kim Jong-un's inability to cope with the public health crisis and its secondary impact on the economy, the elite class in Pyongyang may well question the legitimacy of the Kim family regime.²¹ Unlike the international sanctions, Kim Jong-un cannot blame the coronavirus for mainly targeting North Korea only.

In sum, even though Kim Jong-un may not be worried about the popular uprising in the short term, he has good reason to concern the possibility of elite resistance against his authority in the medium and long term, due to the economic crisis accelerated by the potential coronavirus outbreak.

4. The COVID-19 and its Likely Impact on the North Korean Foreign Policy Behavior

The negative impact of COVID-19 outbreak on the North Korean economy is likely to drive Pyongyang to conduct more military provocations at the tactical level in the medium term. But because North Korea also needs to secure humanitarian and economic aids from the outside, Pyongyang has motivations to engage in diplomacy at the strategic level in the long term.

Specifically, unable to control the coronavirus, Kim Jong-un may well mount more international provocations to display confidence, distract a worried populace, and strengthen internal unity against the perceived threat from the outside. On the other hand, Kim Jong-un also may boost positive engagement with the outside world in search of help against COVID- 19. Kim can even hope that the international community might ease the sanctions in the name of humanitarian assistance. These dual motivations suggest that North Korea’s foreign policy behavior is most likely to swing even more dramatically between provocation and engagement.

	Motivations for Military Provocation	Motivations for Diplomatic Engagement
For Domestic Audience	<p>Q1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · To enhance Kim Jong-un’s image as a strong leader against external threats · To reinforce the perception of external threat, thereby promoting internal unity 	<p>Q2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · To elevate Kim Jong-un’s status as a respectful global leader who can influence the great power politics to serve North Korea’s interests
For International Audience	<p>Q3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · To strengthen deterrence power through the development of military capabilities · To maintain the international community's attention paid on North Korea · To enhance the leverage of nuclear negotiation with the United States · To influence the domestic politics of South Korea and the United States 	<p>Q4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · To induce other countries to provide medical and humanitarian aids · To lift sanctions and extract economic assistance from other countries

TABLE 1. North Korea’s Motivations for Military Provocation and Diplomatic Engagement

Table 1 shows the general motivations for North Korea's military provocation and diplomatic engagement. Of these, the coronavirus outbreak seems to reinforce the motivations of military provocations for the domestic audience, as summarized in Quadrant 1.²² At the same time, it also strengthens the motivations for diplomatic engagement targeting international audience, as summarized in Quadrant 4. This implies that, in combination, the COVID-19 outbreak is likely to drive North Korea to conduct more military provocations in the short term, but also motivates

Pyongyang to make diplomatic gestures to induce humanitarian and economic supports in the medium term.

Military Provocations In March 2020 alone, North Korea conducted three rounds of short-range missile tests. This is the equivalent to the number of missile provocations in the first quarter of 2017 when the tension between North Korea and the United States began to spike. As far as the actual number of projectiles is concerned, North Korea has launched even more in 2020 than in 2017.²³ Of many possible explanations for the renewal of North Korea's military provocations as summarized in Table 1, it deserves special attention that 2020 is the year of the general election for South Korea, which was held on April 15, and of the presidential election scheduled in November in the United States. North Korea has a record of increasing military provocations closer to the election date in these two countries. Accordingly, North Korea's missile tests in the first quarter of 2020 may be designed to influence the domestic politics of South Korea to be shaped in favor of North Korea.²⁴

The increased frequency of military provocations can also be partly explained by the potential coronavirus outbreak in North Korea. South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS), for example, assessed that the missile tests were primarily intended to control the domestic situation. Specifically, the NIS believes that Pyongyang canceled the annual winter drill because of COVID-19, but it does not want the local populace to notice that the authorities are concerned about the virus spread within the military, thus conducted fire-drilling to keep up military morale.²⁵ The commander of the U.S. Forces Korea also said that North Korea had cut back training and had not flown a military aircraft for 24 days.²⁶ The downscaling of regular training and military activities internally appears to motivate further North Korea to resume military activities externally in a more provocative way. In other words, there is a likelihood that the COVID-19 outbreak reinforces the motivations for North Korea to conduct military provocations.

US-North Korea relations The Trump Administration maintains the current policy of maximum pressure at the strategic level, while simultaneously attempting to engage with Pyongyang at the tactical level. The U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo described North Korea's missile developments as "illegal" and urged the international counterparts to remain united to pressure North Korea at a meeting of G7 foreign ministers on March 25.²⁷ Not only the rhetoric, but the US government also took actions to strengthen the sanction regime. On April 9, the US Treasury Department announced that it had incorporated the section titled "Otto Warmbier North Korea Sanctions and Enforcement Act of 2019" from the latest National Defense Authorization Act. The section enables the Treasury Department to impose secondary sanctions on foreign financial institutions that knowingly provide "significant financial services" to North Korea.²⁸ At the same time, the US government agencies have repeatedly offered humanitarian aid to North Korea. The US Treasury Department, while reinforcing the regulation, stated that it remains committed to ensure the delivery of humanitarian assistance to North Korea.²⁹ The White House National Security

Council also made a public statement that the United States supports the people of North Korea vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁰

North Korea takes a similarly confrontational approach against the US pressure. In response to Pompeo's remarks on sanctions, North Korea said to "drop all the interests in dialogue and would repay the U.S. with actual horror and unrest."³¹ While using threatening words with military provocations, however, North Korea also ensures to keep the opportunity for diplomatic engagement opened. For example, President Trump sent a letter to Kim Jong-un to offer help in North Korea's battle against the coronavirus in March. Kim Yo-jong, the sister of Kim Jong-un, said that the "excellent" personal relationship between the two nations' leaders would not affect the broader U.S.-North Korea relationship.³² While warning that the stalled negotiation can restart only when "the equilibrium is kept dynamically...and justice ensured between the two countries," she still praised that "such a personal letter of President Trump as a good example showing the special and firm personal relations with Chairman Kim Jong Un."³³ This way the coronavirus provides an opportunity for diplomatic engagement for both Washington and Pyongyang, but it remains to be seen whether and when Pyongyang decides to utilize this opportunity fully.

China- North Korea relations Although the volume of trade between the two countries has significantly declined in the wake of coronavirus pandemic, Pyongyang and Beijing maintain diplomatically amicable relationship. Beijing has not outwardly criticized Pyongyang's decision to close the border in January, and Kim Jong-un sent a letter to Xi Jinping, offering condolences about the coronavirus outbreak in China.³⁴ The Chinese embassy in Pyongyang also hosted a virtual ritual where the Chinese and North Korean netizens can pay tribute to the chosen Chinese heroes of the Korean War, commemorating the 70th anniversary of the war.³⁵ Based on the close relationship with China, North Korea might use this health crisis to persuade the United Nations to lift the sanction. Indeed, China and Russia have started talking about the need to lift sanctions to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance to North Korea. On March 2, the Chinese ambassador to the United Nations urged the international community to "find a comprehensive solution" to help North Korea battle COVID-19.³⁶ The cross-border trade and smuggling activities will resume as the COVID-19 situation improves, but the timing remains uncertain.

South- North Korea relationship North Korea's relationship with South Korea becomes more unpredictable in the wake of coronavirus pandemic as North Korea's policy toward South Korea swings between provocation and engagement more frequently than before. As noted above, on March 3, North Korea resumed military provocations with firing two short-range ballistic missiles. When South Korean government expressed concerns about the live-fire exercises, North Korea responded in an unprecedented fashion: the first known public statement by Kim Jong-un's younger sister. Kim Yo-jong declared that Seoul was acting like a "frightened dog barking" and called South Korean leaders "perfectly foolish."³⁷ The very next day after Kim Yo-jong made such insulting

remarks, however, Kim Jong-un sent a personal letter to South Korean President Moon Jae-in to offer his condolences for the coronavirus outbreak in South Korea.³⁸ Although the details of the letter have not been released, the act signals North Korea's willingness to resume dialogue with the South, and possibly the United States. President Moon sent his letter to Kim Jong-un, apparently offering North Korea to cooperate over COVID-19, but it was virtually rejected by North Korea's lukewarm attitude.³⁹ This oscillating pattern between hostile and friendly approaches reveals further Pyongyang's deepening dilemma between the need for military provocation for domestic audience and the need to secure humanitarian and economic aids from the international community.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the coronavirus pandemic is a factor that deepens Pyongyang's real dilemma between provocation and engagement. Before the coronavirus outbreak, North Korea has been already stressed under international sanctions. Pyongyang seems to be determined to advance its military capabilities with missile tests for dual purposes of enhancing its deterrence power and of pressuring other countries to ease up sanctions. Then the coronavirus outbreak is most likely to reinforce Pyongyang's motivations for military provocations. Even if the novel virus is already spread within North Korea, it is not expected to pose an immediate threat to Kim Jong-un in the short term. But it surely would have negative impacts on the North Korean economy, thereby intensifying the existing pattern of military provocations. At the same time, North Korea has higher needs to secure humanitarian aid and economic assistance through diplomatic engagement in the wake of the global health crisis in the medium and long term.

The likelihood that North Korea will swing more frequently between provocation and engagement requires the United States and other stakeholders to respond in their own dual fashions: calmly to provocation and with principles to engagement. The COVID-19 situation is most likely to motivate further North Korea's military provocations unusually, but that does not mean that the international community should respond to North Korea's belligerent behavior in an unusual way too. Policymakers should take them less as a threat but more as a call for emergency support. North Korea will continue to conduct military provocations such as missile firing or SLBM tests, but the level of threat is most likely to remain at low-intensity provocations precisely because North Korea needs helps from the outside to cope with the COVID-19 crisis.

From a strategic point of view, North Korea's need for external assistance strengthens Washington's leverage to influence Pyongyang's approach toward nuclear negotiation. If Pyongyang accepts the U.S. offer of aid with the coronavirus, the necessary discussions for that effort may well help pave the ways for the talk about other subjects. Pyongyang can be expected to seek lighter sanctions, and that will be the moment when Washington must reemphasize its final goal of denuclearizing North Korea, while showing flexibility about "smaller deals" that help move toward it.⁴⁰

Yet there is no denying that the coronavirus crisis creates a lot of uncertainties beyond the scope of this initial assessment. First, there exist the dangers of miscalculation and misperception. For example, North Korea might end up conducting another ICBM or nuclear test, thinking that the international community will not be able to take any punishing measures against North Korea in the midst of the global health crisis, but Washington might take it differently. Second, for their own economic hardships, it is uncertain when and how much financial aids China and South Korea can provide to meet North Korea's needs, even if the sanctions are somehow lifted. Third, it is uncertain how the coronavirus will affect the US-China relationship, currently locked in strategic competition, and how the worsening relationship between the two great powers influence their coordination in response to North Korea's military provocations.

While it is hard to make a maximum prediction for how all these factors will play out, this article suggests the minimum forecasting, but with a higher level of confidence, that there is a high likelihood that North Korea already has the COVID-19 outbreak and it is most likely to strengthen further Kim Jong-un's motivation to conduct military provocations. The minimum forecasting is useful as a baseline to assess North Korea's foreign policy behaviors and motivations in the short term. It also suggests that the international community is better to anticipate that a window of opportunity for strategic engagement with North Korea is likely to open in the medium term, as Pyongyang would desire to lift sanctions more strongly than otherwise as the global pandemic continues for a long while.

*** Epilogue- Concerning Kim Jong-un's disappearance**

While this article is in production, Kim Jong-un disappeared from public view, prompting international speculation about his whereabouts. Kim was last seen on April 11, when he attended a Politburo meeting of the Korea Workers' Party. He did not appear on April 15 for the "Day of the Sun" event to commemorate the birth of his grandfather, Kim Il-sung.

Experts and pundits have offered a variety of hypotheses to explain Kim's unusual absence, which can be summarized mainly into two hypotheses. First, Kim Jung-un cannot function as a leader anymore. He might be already dead in comma from the surgery. Alternatively, there might have been a coup, and Kim might be in detention, if not killed already. In any case, in these scenarios, Kim will not come back as a leader. Secondly, Kim Jung-un can function as a leader but decides to stay away from a public event for the time being. Perhaps it is for medical reasons that he needs some time to recover from surgery. Or he is hiding in the wake of COVID-19 outbreak. Maybe he is trying to draw international attention or probe the reactions to his absence from inside and outside the country. In any case, in these scenarios, Kim will resurface to public view sooner or later.

Even if the first hypothesis- that Kim Jong-un is not in a state to function as a national leader for - turns out to be true, the Kim family regime is not likely to fall to political turmoil immediately, not to mention regime collapse. As James Minnich, a seasoned North Korea expert, recently wrote,

there is a high likelihood that Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's younger sister, will succeed power in the absence of Kim Jong-un.⁴¹ And the elites in Pyongyang have good reasons to support the succession of power in unity; as Andrei Lankov pointed out, the elites in Pyongyang have to hang together, or they would be hung separately.⁴² Of course, there will be mounting uncertainty of how long Kim Yo-jong can stay in power, depending on how quickly and effectively Kim Yo-jong consolidates her own power base through shuffling of high ranking officials and purging some likely challengers, as Kim Jong-un did.

Whether Kim Jong-un resurfaces or Kim Yo-jong succeeds power or a third person seizes power, the COVID-19 and its likely impacts will stay in North Korea. Regardless of Kim Jong-un's disappearance, the effects of coronavirus will play into North Korean politics as structural restraints. Whoever the leaders in North Korea will be, they have to deal with the same challenges caused by the novel virus in 2020, with the same motivations for both military provocations and diplomatic engagement as reinforced by the effects of COVID-19.

¹ If so, then there should have been a lively discussion in the international community about how North Korea could be so successful in preventing the spread of the novel virus and what lessons can be learned from the North Korean experiences.

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