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## North Korea's Strict COVID-19 Policies Undermine Kim Jong Un's Goal of Ending Hunger

Dismal trade figures for 2021 attest to the toll the North's border closures are taking on its food supply.



By [Troy Stangarone](#)

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Credit: [Depositphotos](#)

At a [recent party meeting](#), North Korean leader Kim Jong Un set aside a discussion of nuclear talks with the United States and South Korea to focus on ending hunger in North Korea over the next decade and the need to maintain tight COVID-19 protocols. In the short term, however, these two goals are incompatible.

Kim has been warning for months about a food crisis in North Korea. In April, he said that North Korea faced a famine [similar to the “Arduous March”](#) of the 1990s. He also warned of a [food crisis](#) in June, while again [acknowledging the difficult circumstances](#) that North Korea faces on the occasion of the 76th anniversary of the Korean Workers’ Party in October.

North Korea has taken some steps to address the crisis. In August, it released [military wartime grain reserves](#), and it is reported to have struck a deal with China to exchange smuggled [coal for food](#), but these have been insufficient.

Meanwhile, North Korea’s [zero COVID-19 policy](#) has hindered Pyongyang’s ability to import the food and agricultural supplies needed to address the domestic food crisis. To keep COVID-19 out of the country, North Korea has severely

restricted trade across its borders and recently [tightened domestic travel restrictions](#) as well.

The result has been a [dramatic decline](#) in trade with China, which accounts for roughly [90 percent](#) of North Korea's trade. As the pandemic began in 2020, North Korean exports to China declined by 77.7 percent, while imports fell by 80.9 percent.

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Despite global trade growing by [10.8 percent](#) in 2021, the situation remains bleak in North Korea. While trade [briefly improved](#) during the summer months, North Korea's imports from China declined by 53.6 percent through November to \$226 million for the year-to-date. At the same point in 2019, pre-pandemic, North Korea's total imports from China were \$2.3 billion.

North Korean exports to China for the year were down a more modest 9 percent through November 2021 to \$42.1 million. In 2019, they were worth \$192.6 million for first 11 months of the year.

While North Korea briefly attempted to open its border to cargo train service in November of last year, it [quickly reversed course](#) due to COVID-19 outbreaks in China. With Kim's commitment to COVID-19 restrictions, trade is unlikely to improve in the near future.

This impacts access to food in North Korea in at least two ways. First, it limits North Korea's ability to produce food domestically by reducing imports of inputs such as fertilizer. Second, and more directly, it reduces Pyongyang's ability to import food to cover shortages in domestic production.

The news on domestic production and imports of fertilizer is nominally good. Despite the continued deep decline in overall imports, North Korea increased its imports of fertilizer by 202.5 percent in 2020. Along with improved weather, increased fertilizer imports helped to support improved agricultural outputs over 2020, but total imports of fertilizer remain more than 50 percent below 2019 levels. North Korea is [dependent on China](#) for the majority of its fertilizer and inputs for domestic fertilizer production, underlining the importance of trade to food production domestically.

The difficulty has been imports of food, specifically cereals. According to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, [68 percent](#) of the average North Korean's diet consists of cereals, roots, and tubers. Last year, in the year to November, North Korea had imported no cereals, roots, or tubers from China. The decline in imports from China also saw imports of meat, edible fruits and nuts, vegetables, fish and aquatic invertebrates fall to zero.

Without imports North Korea is unable to make up for the shortfall in domestic food production, estimated to be the equivalent of [860,000 tons](#) of cereals in 2021. While China is reported to have shipped [300 tons of corn](#) as aid to North Korea in April, in addition to what it may have provided as part of its aid-for-coal trade with North Korea and any other unreported aid, significant shortages remain.

Historical data suggests that the full deficit would not be made up with imports. Over the last decade, imports of cereals from China have ranged from a low of just under 30,000 tons in 2015 to slightly over 200,000 tons in 2019. However, if North Korea dedicated more resources to importing cereals on par with the

2019 totals, they could make a significant difference in easing the food shortage.

Addressing this gap would require loosening border restrictions to allow in additional purchases of cereals, fertilizer, and food aid, but North Korea's zero COVID-19 policy means that a permanent reopening is unlikely. Instead, the regime will likely loosen restrictions during the summer as it has the last two years when the risk of infections lessens.

Even then, openings will still be subject to potential disruptions as long as China and North Korea follow a zero COVID-19 policy. The Omicron variant is more transmissible than other variants and there are likely to be additional variants of concern before the pandemic ends. As a result, future efforts to restore cargo train service will continue to see disruptions as new outbreaks occur. Even North Korea's construction of decontamination centers is likely to have minimal impact as at their optimum they will limit trade to a function of their capacity divided by the time required for decontamination. Until North Korea is able to transition to a policy of living with COVID-19 – something that will be difficult as long as Pyongyang continues to [reject offers of vaccines from abroad](#) – there will be constraints on trade.

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When Kim Jong Un first came to power a decade ago, he promised that the North Korean people [should not have to tighten their belts again](#). It is a pledge that he has failed to fulfill. If Kim is to succeed this time he will likely have to make policy choices regarding markets, domestic investments in agriculture, and imports that he has been unwilling to make during his first

decade in power. However, as long as the regime maintains a zero COVID-19 policy, North Korea will continue to face a domestic food crisis.

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