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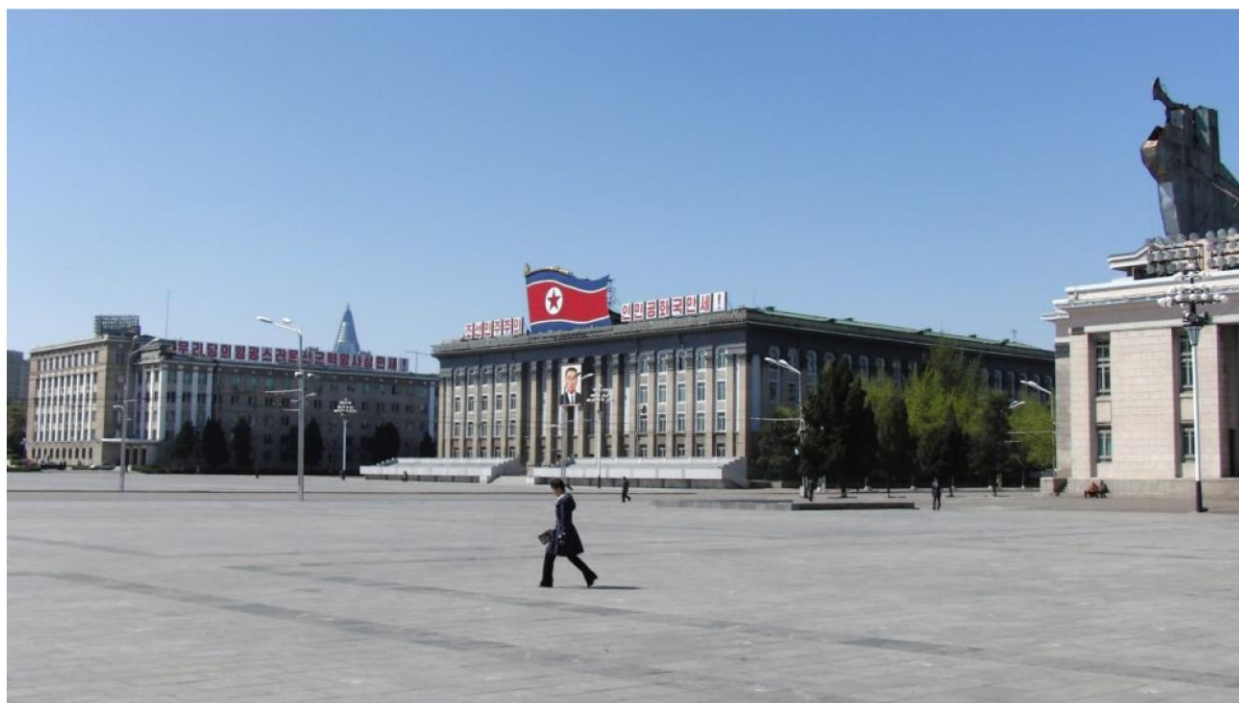
THE PENIN

Pyongyang Continues to Struggle with COVID

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North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly, the country's parliament, adopted the government budget for the new year at its session February 6-7. The budget law was approved with a pledge to develop the economy and improve the people's wellbeing despite the "persevering struggle" against international sanctions and the COVID pandemic.

A particularly noteworthy aspect of the new budget law was that it included an increase of 33 percent for expenditures on emergency pandemic prevention efforts. That statement, however, was vague—probably intentionally so. Details were not provided that would permit us to understand the real significance of a one-third increase in funds for dealing

with the COVID pandemic. A one-third increase, if the current funding is modest, is still a small amount. Furthermore, it was not clear what kind of programs would be given priority for access to new funds. Most important, there was no indication of whether there will be an effort to provide vaccines for the North Korean people. It shows a heightened government concern, but at this point we still have little understanding of what it really means.

Most foreign news reports refer to the Supreme People's Assembly as a rubber-stamp parliament since laws are routinely approved unanimously after speeches praising the wisdom and brilliant leadership of comrade Kim. On this occasion, Kim Jong-un did not attend the parliamentary session, although he did set the parameters for government policy in a speech a month earlier during a five-day plenary session of the Central Committee of the Workers Party in late December 2021. His absence from the Supreme People's Assembly indicates the lack of importance of the North Korean parliament, and it keeps the rumors swirling about the health of the leader.

North Korea Continues to Refuse COVID Vaccines

The impact of the pandemic on North Korea has been severe, and the decision of the Supreme People's Assembly to increase budget resources devoted to COVID prevention underlines how significant it is for Pyongyang. The North Korean government, however, has refused to take advantage of vaccines made available through United Nations health programs.

The UN World Health Organization created COVAX (COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access) to provide equitable access worldwide to vaccines against the virus. The UN organization has sought to help particularly poor countries find vaccines for their people, and North Korea meets the criteria for need. COVAX, however, has cut back the number of vaccine doses allocated for North Korea because that country has so far failed to arrange for any shipments of the vaccine. The number of doses available for the North "now stands at 1.54 million, down from as many as 8.11 million last year." (This does not mean that 8 million doses are sitting in a warehouse waiting to be picked up, but it did provide that the North could request that number of vaccine doses from UN health program supplies, and vaccines would be provided from the ongoing stream of UN vaccines.)

North Korea is not known to have imported any vaccines against COVID-19 for its national response to the virus. In September, the United Nations made 3 million vaccine doses available to the North, but Pyongyang notified the UN that it would not accept the vaccines. There have been reports, however, that border guards and other security officials who have a greater risk of contact with individuals outside North Korea have been vaccinated, but this has not been officially acknowledged. The vaccine was apparently not provided through UN channels.

Railroad Links with China Reopen

When the COVID pandemic first hit, North Korean officials severed rail ties with China, apparently to limit the possibility of the spread of the virus. In November 2021 an effort was made to reopen rail lines, but rail traffic was stopped again after only a few days due to COVID outbreaks in China and the Omicron surge. On January 16 of this year, a North Korean cargo train crossed from Sinuiju, North Korea, into Dandong, China, and returned later that same day.

That single train crossing the Yalu River into China on January 16 was the beginning of a broader resumption of trade between North Korea and China. North Korean freight trains have resumed making trips into and out of China. Chinese merchants and shippers have been told that cargo trains have resumed between the two countries at the Chinese border city of Dandong, which is the most important border crossing point with China. Journalists and others have noted that North Korean railroad personnel have been seen wearing full protective gear, which suggests that the North Koreans are still seriously concerned about preventing spread of the COVID virus, but they are resuming shipments between China and North Korea.

The resumption of rail traffic between North Korea and China is not the result of an end to the pandemic. At the same time that rail traffic across the Yalu River was resumed, a surge in COVID cases from the OMICRON variant was taking place. China tightened restrictions and shut down cities and some rural areas because of the OMICRON surge. This clearly indicates that reopening the border was probably out of urgent need for exports from China and not an action taken because the virus is no longer a threat. Because North Korea is so dependent on imports for sophisticated medicines and medical supplies, as

well as other products that are not produced or not available in North Korea, it may be that demand was so great that it became even more urgent for North Korea to resume trade with China despite the continuing dangers of the pandemic.

Problems With the Food Supply

Even under the best of circumstances North Korea has difficulty meeting the food requirements of its people. Resources are spent on the military rather than on improving the quantity and quality of food produced for the North Korean population. To further complicate issues, weather and especially the appearance of periodic typhoons at the end of the summer have been a very serious problem for food production that continues to have impacts.

In a propaganda film released in December heralding the accomplishments of Kim Jong-un during the year 2021, the description of the food outlook was decidedly pessimistic. The narrator of the film described a meeting in which Kim expressed concern that “what is urgently needed in stabilizing the people’s livelihood is to relieve the tension created by the food supply.” Kim spoke of the need for emergency measures to deal with the “food crisis,” noting that the country had dipped into its emergency grain supply. In June, Kim called the country’s food situation “tense.”

In Kim Jong-un’s speech at the party Central Committee plenum, held in the last five days of December 2021, it was clear that conditions were difficult “for many North Koreans in getting food – either because it is in short supply or because market prices are out of reach for people who have seen their incomes fall.” The COVID pandemic has made the fragile and difficult food situation even worse.

The logic for reopening rail links with China may very well be that Kim and his lieutenants are concerned about the potential for food shortages to create increased political difficulties for the regime. Despite the health risk of reopening rail links with China, assistance from China through food purchases or food aid may be necessary to help Pyongyang limp through this current crisis.

Missile Madness

With North Korea needing to help meet the challenge of COVID and the serious economic problems that the pandemic has brought to the North, why has the Kim regime been engaging in a massive barrage of missile tests?

Pyongyang launched a total of seven missile tests in January 2022, making it the busiest calendar month ever in its missile testing. The launch of a Hwasong-12 intermediate range ballistic missile on January 30 marked the first major long-range weapons test after four years without such a launch. This was the most powerful missile the North has tested since President Biden assumed the U.S. presidency.

At a time when the country is facing serious food problems in addition to the lurking threat of the COVID pandemic, it seems counter-productive to conduct a record-breaking series of missile tests. On closer examination, however, the two may be linked. The missile tests may be very much related to what else is going on domestically.

The North Korean population is facing even greater food shortages, and who better to blame than the United States. The message is that missile testing is essential because of U.S. hostility. The country must be protected, and all loyal citizens must sacrifice. If there is not enough food, the cause is American hostility, not the incompetent policies of the Kim regime. North Korea is short of food because external forces are creating the problems.

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Return to the Peninsula

