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COVID-19 in North Korea: A State-fuelled Tragedy

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Dr Sandip Kumar Mishra evaluates the first and second-order challenges Pyongyang is likely to face as it confronts a COVID-19 outbreak



Dr Sandip Kumar Mishra

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On 13 and 14 May 2022, North Korea reported [1,74,400](#) (<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-05-14/DPRK-reports-21-new-COVID-19-deaths-1a1GYyxqLCg/index.html>) and [2,60,000](#) (<https://www.nknews.org/2022/05/over-1-million-north-koreans-mobilized-to-fight-covid-19-as-outbreak-continues/>) new COVID-19 cases and 21 and 15 deaths, respectively. It is thus hard to believe that the country was officially free from the pandemic until 11 May the same year. On 12 May, Pyongyang admitted to around [5,24,440](#) (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/14/kim-jong-un-warns-of-great-turmoil-21-new-fever-deaths>) total COVID-19 cases in the period late-April to 13 May 2022. Reportedly, 2,43,630 are now fully cured and 2,80,810 are being treated. In a 12 May Politburo meeting, Kim Jong-un went to the extent of saying that North Korea was facing “[great turmoil since the country’s founding](#)” (<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220514000036>).”

It is important to underline that North Korea closed its border very early and implemented other strict restrictions when the pandemic began in early-2020. In the wake of the latest episode of lockdowns in China, North Korea has re-emphasised its own “zero COVID-19 policy” and undertaken [border lockdowns](#) (<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/train-05022022184520.html>) and quarantine measures to keep the country ‘pandemic-free’.

This is disturbing
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(<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/covax-cuts-nkoreas-covid-vaccine-allotment-after-no-deliveries-accepted-2022-02-10/>). This means that the current mass outbreak is going to be disastrous in the short-run—even though we are unlikely to learn the extent of it. North Korean health infrastructure is already tottering and is “[exceedingly vulnerable](https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-koreas-covid-19-lockdown-current-status-and-road-ahead).” (https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-koreas-covid-19-lockdown-current-status-and-road-ahead) The pandemic will further augment the crisis.

Most foreigners gradually left North Korea over the several waves of the pandemic. Due to the recent lockdowns, even the last batch of [UN technical experts and senior managers have also departed](https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-koreas-covid-19-lockdown-current-status-and-road-ahead) (https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-koreas-covid-19-lockdown-current-status-and-road-ahead). Their absence will be another big problem in coordinating any vaccine delivery to North Korea.

The pandemic will also lead to other auxiliary challenges. Due to the lockdowns and authoritarian pressures, secondary health services are already under stress. As per different reports, medicine availability is insufficient, routine immunisation pending, and access to hospitals denied. As per a US assessment, more than [60 per cent of the population is food insecure](https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/outlooks/101733/gfa-32.pdf?v=5285.5) (https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/outlooks/101733/gfa-32.pdf?v=5285.5) because of border closures and low crop yields. In 2020, global economic sanctions, border closures, and natural calamities had already led to [a 4.5 per cent contraction of the North Korean economy](https://m.koreatimes.co.kr/pages/article.asp?newsIdx=313085&fa) (https://m.koreatimes.co.kr/pages/article.asp?newsIdx=313085&fa)(the worst decline since the great famine of the mid-1990s).

North Korean media reports that around [1.3 million](https://www.nknews.org/2022/05/over-1-million-north-koreans-mobilized-to-fight-covid-19-as-outbreak-continues/) (https://www.nknews.org/2022/05/over-1-million-north-koreans-mobilized-to-fight-covid-19-as-outbreak-continues/) people are mobilised to fight the spread of the pandemic. The state has been trying to assure people that most of the COVID-19 deaths so far were a result of people being “[careless in drug taking](http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220515000035)” (http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220515000035) and “[relaxation, irresponsibility, inefficiency and failing](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-korea-reports-first-coronavirus-infection-rcna28451)” (https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-korea-reports-first-coronavirus-infection-rcna28451)”on the part of the country’s anti-epidemic sector—and not because of the virus itself. [China has sought to assure](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52597749) (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52597749) Pyongyang of its assistance in fighting the outbreak. Even [South Korea’s new President Yoon Suk-yeol has offered to help North Korea](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/05/13/north-korea-confirms-first-covid-death-admits-virus-spreading/) (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/05/13/north-korea-confirms-first-covid-death-admits-virus-spreading/) procure vaccines as well as other medical supplies.

It is not clear whether North Korea will accept these offers, or how useful they would be in the short-run. Pyongyang may be more likely to turn down assistance from a ‘hawkish’ South Korean administration under Yoon Suk-yeol, and rely only on China. However, Chinese measures to curb the pandemic such as through lockdowns and its zero COVID-19 policy have been problematic. A resourceful China might be able to provide food, healthcare, and other amenities to its own people under lockdown, but the same may not possible for North Korea. Furthermore, even if North Korea

acquires and admin
(<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/14/world/asia/north-korea-covid-outbreak.html>) and has been determining positive cases through body temperature measurement and symptom detection. This suggests that that they are in a position to report only symptomatic cases: all of them might not be COVID-19, and many asymptomatic cases that are in fact COVID-19 positive may not be reported or counted.



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North Korea also does

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North Korea has consistently denied any COVID-19 cases within the country for the past 2.5 years. Pyongyang spent its scarce resources on defence, kept its economy isolated, didn't try to vaccinate its people, and doesn't even have enough basic equipment to fight the virus, including testing kits. The only solace is that reportedly, the outbreak is essentially caused by the Omicron BA.2 variant, which is generally considered less deadly. Chinese assistance, the Chinese model of dealing with COVID-19, and authoritarian measures: none of these are going to be effective in dealing with the current outbreak in North Korea. This is a situation of extreme human tragedy that is largely state-made.

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