

# North Korea's Foreign Relations in the Second Half of 2024 to Cope with Crisis



Choi, Jangho

Ph.D., Research Fellow

International Cooperation for Korean Unification Team

North Korea's foreign relations in 2024 are in flux. It is facing two crises: strengthened UN sanctions leveled against its economy and the COVID-19 border closure. The combined crises of sanctions and border closures have put a strain on the North Korean economy. North Korea is trying to solve its economic difficulties through international cooperation, and summits are at the heart of these efforts. North Korea could host up to three summits in 2024 alone – one between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin, another with Chinese President Xi Jinping, and the last with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. How will these summits affect the North Korean economy?

First, let's look at the sanctions. The sanctions are designed to put economic pressure on North Korea and force the country to return to denuclearization talks. Following North Korea's fourth nuclear test (6 January 2016) and long-range missile launch (7 February 2016), the UN Security Council changed the sanctions against North Korea from targeted to comprehensive measures. The aim is to apply economic pressure by directly

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restricting North Korea's imports and exports and foreign investment to induce Pyongyang to return to denuclearization negotiations. Since then, the UN Security Council has passed a total of five comprehensive economic sanctions against North Korea, including UNSCR 2321 (30 November 2016), UNSCR 2371 (5 August 2017), UNSCR 2375 (11 September 2017), and UNSCR 2397 (22 December 2017), gradually increasing the level of pressure on the North Korean economy.

A number of previous studies have shown that UN sanctions have had a statistically significant adverse impact on the North Korean economy. In 2018, when the UN sanctions began to take effect, North Korean exports fell by 86.3 percent year-on-year, and North Korean imports fell by 31.2 percent. The decline in North Korean trade is an effect of the UN sanctions. The problem is North Korea's response. While North Korea's economy continues to suffer from UN sanctions, the country has not yet returned to the denuclearization talks.

North Korea's behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic has made us rethink the effectiveness of sanctions. North Korea's border closure from January 2020 to the first half of 2024 led to a sharp decline in foreign trade, and despite its declaring an end to the pandemic in August 2022, the recent, longer-than-expected closure has further exacerbated the country's economic situation. North Korea has not asked the international community for relief, despite the economic hardship caused by the combined crisis reaching levels similar to the famine of the 1990s. In particular, the border blockade, which has continued in 2023 and the first half of 2024, has led to some assessments that North Korea is self-sanctioning itself and that it is unlikely to return to denuclearization negotiations due to its economic difficulties. Why is North Korea rejecting international offers of support and relief?

The biggest reason cited by experts is improved relations with China. The improvement in relations between North Korea and China, which resumed after the Dalian summit held in 2018, has been an important pillar of North Korea's resilience against the complex crisis. In December 2023, North Korea's imports from the PRC exceeded \$200 million. The \$200 million monthly import volume was the same as in 2017, before the imposition of tougher UN sanctions. North Korean wig exports are also driving the country's export recovery, with more than 200 tons exported per month in the second half of 2024. China was the only country that North Korea received masks and medicine from during the COVID-19 border lockdown, making it a significant part of the North Korean economy.

However, relations between North Korea and China are not just improving. Since 2023, there have been subtle tensions between North Korea and China. North Korea declared the end of

the pandemic in August 2022. By 2023, North Korea was supposed to have lifted its border blockade and resumed economic cooperation with China, including resuming tourism and overland trade. The arrival of Wang Yajun, the first Chinese ambassador to North Korea, in March 2023 was a key moment for North Korea to lift the border blockade and resume economic cooperation with China. However, for unknown reasons, in August 2023, North Korea and China decided to revisit economic cooperation in 2024, the 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two countries, and the rest of 2023 went by without any significant steps to improve relations. The first half of 2024 was no different. There have been frequent high-level exchanges of personnel between North Korea and China, including a delegation led by Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong visiting Pyongyang on 25 January 2024, a delegation of the International Department of the Workers' Party of Korea's International Department visiting Beijing on 24 March 2024, and a delegation of the Standing Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference visiting Pyongyang in April 2024. However, there have been no notable developments between North Korea and China, such as the resumption of air flights, resumption of tourism, resumption of overland trade, or allowing cross-border personnel to travel between the two countries. In February 2024, North Korea's imports from the People's Republic of China fell below \$100 million. This indicates that the relationship between North Korea and China cannot be that good.

The same goes for summits between North Korea and China. There are three major events in 2024. The first is 15 April, Kim Il Sung's birthday; the second is 27 July, North Korea's National Day of War; and the third is 6 October, the date of diplomatic relations between North Korea and China. The 15th of April passed without event for North Korea and China. 27 July is the anniversary of the victory in the Korean War, and is expected to be dominated by events to improve relations with Russia, with whom North Korea conducts military cooperation. In 2023, North Korea and Russia also celebrated a military cooperation event. As a result, a summit between North Korea and China is expected on 6 October 2024. This is when China is expected to invite Kim Jong Un to Beijing for a summit. However, many questions remain as to whether China will hold a summit with North Korea, as there have been no significant steps to improve economic cooperation between China and North Korea.

Why haven't relations between North Korea and China improved quickly enough? Some theorize that China is under pressure from the United States over the North Korean issue and is unwilling to quickly improve relations with North Korea, while others suggest that China is trying to avoid the appearance of a triangular collaboration between North Korea, China, and Russia by presenting itself as a big country that is accountable to the international community. I believe

this is because China and North Korea have not been able to agree on the issue of visas for North Korean workers dispatched to China. If North Korea were to open its borders, one of the first issues to be discussed would be the return of North Korean workers through the border. The problem is that North Korea appears to be demanding that China issue new visas that would allow it to redeploy workers on the same scale as returning North Korean workers. North Korea is unlikely to give up on the issue of re-dispatching its expatriate workers, as they account for a large part of its foreign currency earnings. However, North Korea's demand for China to issue new visas for expatriate workers would be in violation of the tightened UN sanctions against North Korea. This is something China cannot afford to do lightly under international scrutiny. North Korea must be frustrated with China. As a result, China and North Korea's inability to agree on the issue of overseas workers seems to have stalled the improvement of relations between North Korea and China.

North Korea's military cooperation with Russia is also a source of comfort for Pyongyang. In the wake of the Russian-Ukrainian war that began in 2022, North Korea has been exporting arms to Russia. The continued production and export of weapons is believed to be having a positive impact on the North Korean economy, boosting the steel and machinery industries. The revitalization of the steel and machinery industries is believed to have led to some recovery in North Korea's industrial production.

Tensions also exist between North Korea and Russia. The biggest concern is that a cessation of the Russian-Ukrainian war would mean a cessation of military cooperation between North Korea and Russia. Once Russia no longer needs North Korea's conventional weapons, there is a view that military cooperation between North Korea and Russia will cease, as it did between 2000 and 2020. There are now many efforts by North Korea and China to develop the current military cooperation into economic cooperation. However, military cooperation between North Korea and Russia is unlikely to be easy. The main difficulty is that the cost of economic cooperation between North Korea and Russia is much higher than that between North Korea and China. In 2024, Russian tourism to North Korea resumed, but on a small scale – no more than 300 people. A Russian tour to North Korea costs between \$1,000 and \$2,000, which is comparable to the cost of travelling from Russia to Southeast Asia, China, or Japan. As a result, economic cooperation between North Korea and Russia has focused on “soft” projects, such as institutional improvements and people-to-people exchanges, and not on “hard” projects, such as the construction of cross-border infrastructure.

North Korea and Russia appear to be looking to resolve tensions between the two sides through a summit. The closest possible date for a summit is in May. Russian President Putin

is expected to visit North Korea on 18-19 May, following his 16-17 May visit to China. If this proves to be the case, expanded military and economic cooperation between North Korea and Russia in the second half of 2024 is inevitable. The second possible date is 27 July, the anniversary of North Korea's victory in the Korean War. In 2023, North Korea hosted Russia's defense minister at a series of arms fairs, as well as at the Lunar New Year. The same event could take place in 2024.

A possible summit between North Korea and Japan has also been in the news, albeit quite unexpectedly. North Korea is demanding that Japan agree to end the Japanese abductees issue and refrain from mentioning denuclearization as preconditions for a summit. The United States, on the other hand, is demanding that Japan put denuclearization and a ground investigation into the Japanese abductees issue at the top of the summit agenda. If Japan can find a balance between the United States and North Korea, a summit between North Korea and Japan may be possible. It is thought that Japan has no choice but to accept the US demands. However, since the United States also believes that improved relations between North Korea and Japan will help reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula, Japan will first try to reconcile the differences between Japan and the United States, and then reconcile the positions of North Korea and Japan to broker a summit between North Korea and Japan.

However, it is unlikely that a summit between North Korea and Japan will be held within 2024. First of all, after the US presidential election in November 2024, once the US policy towards North Korea is decided, Japan will try to take advantage of this to hold a summit with North Korea. Therefore, a summit between North Korea and Japan is likely to be discussed only in the first half of 2025.

In summary, North Korea's external relations are expected to be turbulent in the second half of 2024. With Russia's refusal to extend the UN Sanctions Committee's mandate, there is no longer a means to monitor North Korea's violations of UN sanctions. As a result, North Korea will likely seek to address its economic woes by expanding economic cooperation with China and Russia.

However, it will not be that easy for North Korea to improve its international relations. A summit between North Korea and Russia is expected to be relatively easy compared to other summits. Russia needs North Korea's weapons, and North Korea needs to rejuvenate its economic cooperation with Russia, so a summit between Russia and North Korea is likely to be easy because their needs are aligned. It is also likely that North Korea and Russia will continue low-level economic cooperation, such as regular passenger flights and regular international trains.

On the other hand, China and North Korea will likely continue to maintain a somewhat distant relationship in the second half of 2024, similar to the first half of 2024. The year 2024 marks the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations between North Korea and China, and while both sides have an incentive to try to improve relations, the circumstances are not conducive to doing so. High-level personnel exchanges will continue between both sides, but Chinese tourism to North Korea will not resume, and North Korean workers in China are not expected to return. However, in the area of trade, North Korea and China will continue to cooperate. North Korea is believed to be procuring raw materials and machinery from China to produce weapons for export to Russia.

The international community should use the resumption of economic cooperation between North Korea and Russia as a basis for pressuring North Korea. North Korea has officially maintained its border closure over fears of spreading the pandemic. As a result, North Korean workers in China have not yet returned to North Korea. However, North Korea's border closure is weakly evident in the context of economic cooperation between North Korea and Russia. Russian tourism to North Korea has resumed, and regular international train services between Russia and North Korea are expected to resume soon. The level of Russo-DPRK cooperation shows that the problem of spreading infectious diseases such as COVID-19 in North Korea has been resolved. This means that China does not need to delay the return of North Korean workers, citing North Korea's border closure due to the pandemic. If China refuses to do so, the international community should point out that Russian tourism to North Korea should also be suspended due to North Korea's border closure due to the pandemic. [KIEP](#)