

# **Peaceful Coexistence and Sustainable Development on the Korean Peninsula during COVID-19: Non-Traditional Security Threat and the Prospect of Inter-Korean Cooperation**

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The security surrounding the Korean Peninsula has mainly focused on resolving the nuclear problem, deterring military conflict, and enhancing national security. However, in recent years, the importance of non-traditional security agendas such as hunger, health, and environment is gradually increasing. The COVID-19 pandemic clearly shows that the widespread nature of the virus can threaten the safety of countries and the lives of citizens across national boundaries, revealing the importance of understanding and responding to the new security crisis on the Korean Peninsula. It is estimated that the food and health conditions in North Korea have worsened as borders are controlled and imported goods have become difficult to obtain in the wake of COVID-19. This article argues that, for sustaining peace on the Korean Peninsula, we should pay more attention to human, health, and environmental security for people's security, livelihood, and dignity. Given the impact of COVID-19 on human development, hunger, and health, there is a need for South Korea to establish a new model for inter-Korean cooperation to alleviate the humanitarian situation in North Korea.

**Keywords:** Non-traditional security, human security, COVID-19, North Korea, inter-Korean cooperation

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## I. Introduction

Since the inauguration of the Moon Jae-in administration in May 2017, there has been a shift from extreme tensions to dialogues between the two Koreas, increasing expectations for peaceful coexistence and inter-Korean cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. As a result of three inter-Korean summits in 2018, the 'Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification on the Korean Peninsula' was adopted on April 27, as well as the 'Pyongyang Joint Declaration' on September 19. Through this, the 'complete denuclearization' of the Korean Peninsula was confirmed and the basic framework for the development of inter-Korean relations was established. However, North Korea-U.S. summit held in Hanoi, Vietnam in February 2019 ended without agreement, resulting in the North Korean nuclear negotiations hitting a deadlock. Hereupon, the momentum of dialogue for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the development of inter-Korean relations has weakened. In this situation, the outbreak of COVID-19 is creating a new environment for peaceful coexistence and international cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. The 2020 coronavirus pandemic goes beyond the problem of the mass spread of the disease and threat to human health; there are signs of a great transformation with its threat to natural security and safety, and changes to the order of the international community.<sup>1</sup>

The prolonged coronavirus pandemic will have a significant impact on inter-Korean relations because of its potential to change the priority of national security and policy resources. This is because human-to-human transmission of the virus transcends borders, which is bringing limitations on human contact and the exchange of material resources. In particular, the Moon Jae-in administration's policy goal of deepening inter-Korean exchanges and corporation and resolving humanitarian issues is directly under the influence of the pandemic. Thus, COVID-19 is highly likely to become an important external variable in the progress of the peace process on the Korean Peninsula through denuclearization and a permanent peace establishment.

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1 Henry Kissinger, "The Coronavirus Pandemic Will Forever Alter the World Order," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2020.

Lately, the demand for inter-Korean cooperation in non-traditional security fields such as human and livestock infectious diseases, disaster and climate change is increasing. In addition, it is worth paying attention to the fact that North Korea has expressed its willingness to actively participate in the implementation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Against this background, this article examines the importance of the non-traditional security agenda that is affecting the recent security situation on the Korean Peninsula and examines the changes in North Korea's external environment and prospects for inter-Korean cooperation as a result of the spread of COVID-19.

## **II. Non-traditional Security and New Security Crisis**

### **2.1 Emerging Discourse on Non-traditional Security**

Recently, in existing traditional security agendas, areas that pose new threats to the survival and prosperity of the country such as hygiene, health, environment, energy, etc. have gained attention, increasing the need for research and interest in non-traditional security. During the Cold War, traditional national security was focused on preserving the territory of sovereign states and securing military deterrence against external threats. In line with the theory of Realism, the national security of a state was regarded as a primary concern to ensure the protection of its vital interests and the deterrence of attacks by other states.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the military capability has been the main requirement for a state confronting a harsh international environment. A state's principal concern has been external military threats and the way to defend and build up its deterrent.

However, as the threat factors of modern security advance from inter-state war or militarized conflict to economic vulnerabilities and environmental and social problems, there has been an expansion in the scope of security discourse. Non-traditional security agendas such as civil war, state failure,

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2 David Baldwin, "Security Studies and The End of the Cold War," *World Politics*, vol. 48, no. 1 (1995): 120.

environmental destruction, HIV/AIDS etc. are becoming new security threats at a global level beyond what affects individual countries. Since the early 2000s terrorism and cyber-attack have also begun to be considered a serious security problem for countries and the world. In this sense, the threat to the modern state arising from internal conflict, transnational crime, disease, poverty, environmental pollution, and virus infection requires a new awareness of international security. Theoretically, the widening approach of security or emerging security challenges have been articulated by securitization theory which highlights the process by which a new object becomes a security issue.<sup>3</sup> Securitization, as constituted through political actions and choices, illuminates how “the issue is represented and accepted” as a security threat, and why some security issues are ignored.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the Cold War, the supporters for expanding the concept of security paid attention to new threats such as human security and environmental security.<sup>5</sup>

This phenomenon shows that the traditional concept of national security – deterring an ‘external’ military threat – is insufficient to meet the conditions for the safety and well-being of a country.<sup>6</sup> The discussion on non-traditional security focuses on two aspects: 1) the object of security is not only the state but also the individual or humans collectively;<sup>7</sup> and 2) threat to security should not be limited to statist and military challenges but should be expanded to include socio-economic and environmental challenges.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the prevalence of chronic poverty, disease and oppression, and the issues regarding

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3 Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

4 Jonna Nyman, “Securitization,” in *Security Studies: An Introduction*, eds. Paul D Williams and Matt McDonald (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 107.

5 Ibid., 101.

6 Edward Newman, “Human Security,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, December 22, 2017, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-215>.

7 Ken Booth, “Beyond Critical Security Studies,” in *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*, ed. Ken Booth (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2005), 268.

8 Alan Collins, “Introduction: What is Security Studies?” in *Contemporary Security Studies*, ed. Alan Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9.

protection from daily personal fears, sudden disasters, and injury received more attention as non-traditional threats in security analysis.

Human security is people-centered, referring to "safety from the constant threats of hunger, disease, crime and repression," and "protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of our daily lives."<sup>9</sup> What is important for human security is to recognize that human beings should be the referent objective of security. This view argues that the traditional concept of security, which is based on state-centricity and military orientation, falls short of preserving the security of people and of dealing with political, social, economic and environmental issues.<sup>10</sup> The proponents of human security argue that "the concept of national security is too narrow and too static," and there are natural disasters, persistent poverty, epidemics, and massive death and destruction occurring outside of inter-state conflict.<sup>11</sup> In the early 1990s scholars such as Booth and Tickners described security in terms of "a holistic character and non-statist approach," and argued that it should reflect the multiple insecurities posed by ecological destruction, unjust social relations, poverty, structural violence.<sup>12</sup> On the policy side, the 1994 Human Development Report (HDR) highlighted that "for too long, the concept of security has been shaped by the potential for conflict between states. For too long, security has been equated with the threats to a country's borders. For too long, nations have sought arms to protect their security."<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the 1994 HDR emphasized that (human) security should address twofold freedom: 'freedom from want and freedom from fear.'<sup>14</sup> Although there is no agreed definition of, or approach to, human security, most scholars claim the necessity of incorporating the

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9 UNDP, *Human Development Report: New Dimensions of Human Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.

10 UNESCO, *Human Security: Approaches and Challenges* (Paris: UNICEF, 2008), 4.

11 Randolph Persaud, "Human Security, in *Contemporary Security Studies*, ed. Alan Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 145.

12 Ken Booth, "Security and Emancipation," *Review of International Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1991): 317; J. Ann Tickner, *Gender and International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 53.

13 UNDP, *Human Development Report: New Dimensions of Human Security*, 3.

14 *Ibid.*, 3.

developmental and human rights aspects into the concept of security instead of focusing only on violent conflict or territorial protection.

This broadening of the concept of security directly concerns physical security, protecting individuals and communities from threats posed by danger, natural disasters, and diseases. For some, this means that there is no security without prevention in all forms of physical threats. Persistent poverty, poor nutrition, and global diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis not only deteriorate individuals' lives but also destroy entire communities crossing national borders. In this sense, 'health security' that aims to protect people and the community from all kinds of food and health threats has increased in importance in human survival and well-being.<sup>15</sup> According to the 2020 state of food security and nutrition report, 690 million people, which equates to 8.9 percent of the world population, are estimated to have been undernourished in 2019, and the negative effects of COVID-19 that cause sudden deterioration of food security may add an additional 83 to 132 million people to that figure in 2020.<sup>16</sup> Millions of people and young children die from infectious diseases including severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), avian flu, swine flu, and Ebola. In particular, least developed countries (LDCs), which lack public health infrastructures and essential medicines, are vulnerable in dealing with the rapid spread of virus infections. In the twenty-first century, people cannot discuss human security without considering the links between health and security. Along with infectious diseases including HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, new emerging diseases such as SARS, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and avian influenza put a considerable burden on many developing countries.<sup>17</sup> Since the spread of infectious disease can affect food insecurity and sudden increases in food insecurity leads to malnutrition, a range of health issues, particularly lethal and contagious ones, not only pose

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15 The 1994 Human Development Report outlines food security and health security respectively, and each term has its own definition, but this paper uses health security in a broad sense that embraces food security.

16 FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020* (Rome: FAO, 2020), xviii-xix.

17 Stefan Elbe, "Health and Security," in *Contemporary Security Studies*, ed. Alan Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 371.

a direct threat to individuals, households and society, but also represent direct threats to their security.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, environmental degradation is of course linked to human security components. During the industrialization period, ecological issues such as deforestation, soil erosion, pollution of air and oceans were merely recognized as developmental or political issues in many countries. However, the loss of forests, the expansion of deserts, the exploitation of land and forests, and water scarcity not only have had a negative impact on global ecosystems, but have also resulted in the vulnerability of individuals and communities.<sup>19</sup> In particular, due to the effect of greenhouse gases on global warming, climate change has resulted in a rise in temperature and sea level, posing an existential threat to people and states and creating human insecurity. Considering that the lack of environmental security can threaten peace, Robert Kaplan points out that "population pressure, environmental degradation, and scarcity of resources can lead to societal collapse."<sup>20</sup> Namely, 'environmental security' based on the realization that changes in the environment are a great threat to human well-being has transpired as an emerging security area.

Traditionally, extreme poverty, the issues of HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation, and internal conflict have seriously affected the poorest and most vulnerable populations, causing a major concern for nations and international organizations. Yet, as the impact of these non-traditional agendas on people and nations has become even clearer and more comprehensive, the attention to the needs for specific individuals and communities has expanded the promotion of human rights, consideration of sustainable development, and advancement of safety and security at the regional and international levels. Today's threats posed by the pandemic and climate change clearly transcends

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18 Ibid., 374; Steve Wiggins and Rachel Slater, "Food Security," in *The Routledge Handbook of New Security Studies*, ed. J. Peter Burgess (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 133.

19 Anna Lanoszka, *International Development: Socio-Economic Theories, Legacies, and Strategies* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 193.

20 Ibid., 198; Robert D. Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy-Shattering the Dreams of the Post-Cold War* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2001), 19-20.

national borders. In this sense, since the 1990s, the discourses on human security and environmental security have become substantially increased in academia and international organizations.

## 2.2 Non-traditional Security and International Cooperation

Crises arising from a non-traditional security agenda are not limited to individual countries but often bring transnational repercussions. Accordingly, international solidarity and cooperation to promote human security, health security, and environmental security are extremely important as non-traditional security crises exceed the capabilities of individual countries to respond adequately. The expansion of the discourse of human security and environmental security is also linked to the criticism that the state-centric concept of traditional security has shown limitations in responding to the modern national crisis. After the Cold War, international organizations and multilateral cooperation bodies have played an important role in the expansion of the concept and logic of non-traditional security. In the 1994 HDR, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) emphasized that increasing the prosperity of human life goes beyond economic wealth, and presented seven areas of human security: economy, food, health, environment, individuals, communities, and politics. Considering the significance of human security, Amartya Sen argued that “development is not only about the growth of GNP per head, but also about the expansion of human freedom and dignity.”<sup>21</sup> The UN Charter also appreciated the value of a human-centered approach by linking social, humanitarian and economic issues.<sup>22</sup> In line with this, the Commission on Human Security (CHS), which was established in 2001, also called for “freedom from want” and “free from fear” to address the emerging security agendas such as terrorist attacks, ethnic violence, and epidemics.<sup>23</sup>

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21 Amartya Sen, “Why Human Security?” (presentation, International Symposium on Human Security, Tokyo, July 28, 2000).

22 Shahin Malik, “Human Security,” in *International Security Studies: Theory and Practice*, eds. Peter Hough, Shahin Malik, Andrew Moran and Bruce Pilbeam (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015), 59.

23 Commission on Human Security, *Human Security Now* (New York: Commission

As for the discourse on environmental security, international conferences and multilateral agreements on environmental issues began in full swing after 1970. At the first global summit regarding an environmental agenda, the UN Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) was held in Stockholm in 1972, and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) was established through this Stockholm Conference. The UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adopted there were important starting points for this effort. In particular, "Our Common Future," published by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987, contributed to expanding discussions on economic growth, the environment, and mutual relations on development. Sustainable development is here defined as "development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs,"<sup>24</sup> and this prompted a transition from a focus on economic growth to a discourse on sustainable development that considers the three axes of the economy, society and environment. This means that three components—human development, economic advancement, and the environment—lie on an interdependent path and should be pursued in concert with each other.

Although the importance of establishing global governance and multilateral cooperation for responding to the non-traditional security agenda is growing, sovereign states centered on national interests have indeed shown a passive or inconsistent attitude toward solidarity and cooperation for the common interest. Although climate change and its adverse effects are a common concern for humanity, the US withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001 and officially notified their withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2019. The recent accusations of blame between the U.S. and China over the COVID-19 incident, and the lack of initial response by the World Health Organization (WHO), served as an opportunity to once again explore the limitations of international cooperation for health and security. It can be said that this shows the status

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on Human Security, 2003), iv.

<sup>24</sup> UN, "Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: 'Our Common Future'," August 4, 1987. A/42/427, 54.

of the *realpolitik* of the great powers and the limitations of non-traditional security. However, it is also true that the discourse on human security and environmental security can curb the monopoly of the security discourse that the major powers put emphasis on traditional security concerns and demand a shared responsibility for a non-traditional security agenda.<sup>25</sup>

Importantly, there has been a gradual increase in the number of crises caused by the non-traditional security agenda on the Korean Peninsula, and a new level of response is becoming more important. Recent cases of the spread of infectious diseases through livestock, such as wild boars and migratory birds within the Korean Peninsula have revealed the need for concrete inter-Korean cooperation plans and systems to effectively respond to the new security crisis.

### **III. The COVID–19 Pandemic and International Cooperation: Between the Need for Solidarity and National Priority**

#### **3.1 COVID–19: Going Beyond a Health Emergency to a Systemic Crisis**

The recent COVID-19 situation has shown that the spread of the virus can go beyond the crisis of individual countries and become a factor of a transnational security crisis. From the perspective of non-traditional security, the COVID-19 crisis requires new perceptions and responses regarding the following three points.

First, COVID-19 is not only a health emergency revealing problems such as the outbreak and rapid spread of a virus and need for response, but it is also creating a political and economic crisis in the country. The coronavirus pandemic has shown that the threat of viral infectious diseases is not limited to the health and health emergency of the country, but that it is a political

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25 Bo-Hyuk Suh, "The Role of State for Human Security: An Exploration of Implication for the Inter-Korean Relations," *The Journal of Northeast Asia Research*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2012): 77.

and economic problem that causes political instability and vulnerability of the national system.<sup>26</sup> The UN has stated that COVID-19 is the most serious test it has faced since its founding.<sup>27</sup> The pandemic goes beyond being a health emergency to a systemic crisis that directly affects societies and economies in many countries.<sup>28</sup> In particular, this phenomenon is more pronounced in the least developed countries where emergency medical services and infrastructure are inferior, population density is relatively high, and access to basic healthcare services is limited.<sup>29</sup> With its weak healthcare system, North Korea is not an exception in this situation. Moreover, since North Korea is suffering from economic damage due to the UN Security Council sanctions, the impact of the coronavirus on North Korea's regime stability cannot be overlooked. It is difficult to manage viral infectious diseases with the traditional concept of security, and transboundary infectious diseases can affect the entire Korean Peninsula. Thus, as it has been confirmed that the spread of infectious diseases and viruses through livestock and birds can pose a threat to the security and safety of the entire Korean Peninsula across borders, it is necessary to make appropriate preparations.

Second, the coronavirus pandemic has fortified countries' inward-looking tendency, giving rise to countries focusing on solving domestic problems rather than multilateral or international cooperation. Many experts predict that even if the coronavirus pandemic ends, nationalism will intensify, competition among the strong powers will deepen, and there will be a relaxation of the global international cooperation system, and a contraction of global economic governance based on shared interests.<sup>30</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic shows that

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26 Nic Cheeseman, "The Coronavirus could Topple Governments around the World," *Foreign Policy*, March 31, 2020.

27 UN, "UN Launches COVID-19 Plan that Could Defeat the Virus and Build a Better World," *UN News*, March 31, 2020, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1060702>.

28 UNDP, *COVID-19 and Human Development: Assessing the Crisis, Envisioning the Recovery* (New York: UNDP, 2020), 4.

29 Robert Malley and Richard Malley, "When the Pandemic Hits the Most Vulnerable," *Foreign Affairs*, March 31, 2020.

30 Stephen Walt, "A World Less Open, Prosperous, and Free," in "How the World

even hegemonic powers such as the United States or the European Union have been inert and incapable to contain the crisis.<sup>31</sup> In response to the coronavirus outbreak, most countries are introducing large-scale economic stimulus policies, expanding medical service expenditures, and pushing for emergency financial expenditures to help the vulnerable. Under such circumstances, it will not be easy for developed countries or donors in the North to implement active aid policies targeting underdeveloped countries in the South.

Third, the COVID-19 crisis shows that state sovereignty prevails over collective action. Despite the need for global solidarity and cooperation, two world powers, the U.S. and China, not only have been lethargic in mitigating the impact of the coronavirus, but also clashed with each other over many issues including the cause of the outbreak and management of the coronavirus pandemic. Neither the U.S. nor China have shown responsible leadership in confronting the COVID-19 pandemic. This COVID-19 is a challenge to both democracies and authoritarians. On one hand, the health crisis exposed the vulnerability of preparedness among Western democracies although they have gone through outbreaks of Ebola, SARS, and MERS. On the other hand, viewing the cases of Hungary, Rwanda, and Russia, this pandemic gives an opportunity for authoritarians to consolidate their own power.<sup>32</sup> While a health crisis that transcends national borders endangers people's lives and human development in the world, global cooperation among countries falters, and great powers only reveal a deeper conflict and mistrust amid the unprecedented crisis.

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Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Foreign Policy*, March 20, 2020; Robin Niblett, "The End of Globalization as We Know It," in "How the World Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Foreign Policy*, March 20, 2020.

31 The Trump administration downplayed the severity of the COVID-19 crisis when the COVID-19 cases were reported and did not request test kits that were available from the WHO. The European Union also delayed in testing and implementing lockdowns. For the related discussion see, Adam Tooze, "America Is Ailing – and Leading the World," *Foreign Policy*, April 1, 2020; Dani Rodrik, "Will COVID-19 Remake the World," *Project Syndicate*, April 6, 2020.

32 Jeffrey Smith and Nic Cheeseman, "Authoritarians are Exploiting the Coronavirus. Democracies Must Not Follow Suit," *Foreign Affairs*, April 28, 2020.

In the case of North Korea, the government's tight measures to contain the spread of the virus are inseparable from the stability and security of Kim Jong Un's regime.

### 3.2 COVID-19 and Issues of Inequality

The damage and ripple effects caused by COVID-19 are growing at an alarming rate. In particular, negative impacts are exacerbated in low-income countries or least developed countries, showing widespread effects across the economy, education and health.<sup>33</sup> The UNDP has warned that COVID-19 could push back human development for the first time since the 1990s.<sup>34</sup> COVID-19 is negatively impacting health, income and education, which are key articles of the Human Development Index, and the impact is expected to be much greater in developing countries.

COVID-19 is bringing about a slowdown in global economic growth, increasing unemployment rates, and intensifying poverty and hunger. The UNDP predicts that the per capita gross national income will decrease by 4 percent in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>35</sup> According to the World Bank, the global growth rate in 2020 will decrease by 5.2 percent due to COVID-19, and if lockdowns in each country continue into the second half of 2020, it is predicted that this could drop further to 8 percent.<sup>36</sup> The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) predicted that the global economic growth rate in 2020 will be -6 percent because of COVID-19, and in a double-hit scenario due to a second wave, it is predicted to fall -7.6 percent.<sup>37</sup> A global economic recession unavoidably leads to a decline in investment and employment. A decline in GDP could create an additional

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33 Jeffrey D. Sachs, "How Inequality Fuels COVID-19 Deaths," *Project Syndicate*, June 29, 2020.

34 UNDP, *COVID-19 and Human Development: Assessing the Crisis, Envisioning the Recovery* (UNDP: New York, 2020), 6.

35 *Ibid.*, 6.

36 World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2020), 5-6.

37 OECD, *OECD Economic Outlook*, Volume 2020, Issue 1, No. 107 (Paris, 2020), 13.

250,000 unemployed people worldwide, increasing the world's poorest by one million and doubling the number facing severe food insecurity to 265 million by the end of 2020.<sup>38</sup> As COVID-19 is spreading from one country to another at a faster rate, it is shifting from a global health crisis to an economic emergency connected with a food security emergency.<sup>39</sup> The WFP estimated that if international communities do not take any further actions, the number of acutely food insecure people in low- and middle-income countries will reach 270 million people by the end of 2020. It will be an 82 percent increase compared to the number of acutely food insecure people pre-COVID.<sup>40</sup>

The problem is that this crisis will inevitably hurt vulnerable groups including children, women, the elderly and people in the least developed countries. The majority of LCDs' economies rely on external demand from the global supply chain, so a sharp drop in global demand and a decline in exports and income caused by the pandemic will have a serious negative impact on their economies.<sup>41</sup> As Stiglitz comments, faced with the sudden rise of COVID-19 deaths, deepening economic downturn, increased unemployment, and worsening poverty and hunger, lower-income countries have "fewer and harder choices" compared with advanced economies.<sup>42</sup> These countries are more likely to have poor healthcare and social protection systems. High levels of inequality weaken social cohesion and social trust and deepen political polarization, which in turn, negatively affects the government's ability and responsiveness.<sup>43</sup> If the economic recovery in developed countries is delayed or the economic restraint measures are prolonged, the level of poverty and deprivation in LCD countries is expected to increase rapidly.

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38 UN DESA, *Sustainable Development Outlook 2020: Achieving SDGs in the Wake of COVID-19: Scenarios for Policymakers* (New York: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020), 7.

39 WFP, "COVID-19: Potential Impact on the World's Poorest People" (Rome, 2020), 11.

40 WFP, "WFP Global Response to COVID-19: June 2020" (Rome, 2020), 5.

41 UN DESA, "COVID-19 and the Least Developed Countries," UN/DESA Policy Brief, no. 66 (New York, 2020).

42 Joseph E. Stiglitz, "Internationalizing the Crisis," *Project Syndicate*, April 6, 2020.

43 Jeffrey D. Sachs, "How Inequality Fuels COVID-19 Deaths," *Project Syndicate*, June 29, 2020.

## **IV. North Korea's International Cooperation in the Wake of COVID-19**

### **4.1 North Korea's Response to COVID-19**

Although it is difficult to compare the impact of COVID-19 on the two Koreas and their response to it, they are indeed in very different situations. In the case of South Korea, the government's ability to adjust quickly and respond constructively was evaluated as an exemplary case by many countries.<sup>44</sup> Contrarily, North Korea has revealed that there have been no confirmed cases of COVID-19 up until the present, September 2020.<sup>45</sup> North Korea is focusing on preventative measures to prevent the influx and spread of the virus, but its human, material, and institutional capabilities seem to be in a weak state. On January 21, 2020, North Korea closed its borders to protect itself against an influx of virus infections and completely blocked the inflow of all foreign tourists, goods and supplies. In addition, strong containment measures are ongoing, including quarantine measures for 40 days for all persons in contact with entrants. North Korea convened a meeting of the political bureau of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea on April 11 2020, and in response to the COVID-19 situation, the meeting adopted a joint resolution for adopting national preventative measures for the safety of residents.<sup>46</sup> Considering North Korea's continued "strict top-class emergency anti-epidemic measures" and the aftereffects of such measures on every aspect of the society and economy, Kim Jong Un's "corona leadership" is significant for the governance and the maintenance of the regime.<sup>47</sup>

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44 Victor Cha, "South Korea Offers a Lesson in Best Practices," *Foreign Affairs*, April 10, 2020.

45 Jeongmin Kim, "North Korea tested 3,374 people for COVID-19 — all results negative, WHO says," *NK NEWS*, September 30, 2020, accessed October 10, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/2020/09/north-korea-tested-3374-people-for-covid-19-all-results-negative-who-says/>.

46 *Rodong Sinmun*, April 12, 2020.

47 Min Hong, "Analysis of a Politburo Meeting of the Workers' Party of Korea and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Session of the 14<sup>th</sup> Supreme People's Assembly in North Korea," (KINU Online Series 20-06, Korea Institute for National Unification, Seoul, 2020), accessed October 12, 2020, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/www/jsp/prg/api/dlVE.jsp?menuIdx=645&category=>

With North Korea, there is a possibility that diagnosing and tracking confirmed cases is not being performed properly, and the damage caused by the virus epidemic is expected to be quite large given the lack of emergency medical services and poor medical infrastructure. A mass spread of COVID-19 would harm the livelihood and human rights of North Koreans, who are suffering from economic difficulties due to international sanctions and border closures.<sup>48</sup>

#### **4.2 Crisis in North Korea: Worsening Economy due to Trade Decline between North Korea and China**

The crisis that North Korea is facing now is not only caused by COVID-19 itself with an underdeveloped health system and a lack of testing capacities. Rather, the impact of COVID-19 also further deepens the concern over a continuing and worsening threat to survival and the wellbeing of civilians caught in the regime's nuclear power ambitions and the continued sanctions imposed on the country. Namely, the spill-over effects of COVID-19 will further deteriorate North Korea's economic downturn and increase the number of people facing acute hunger and malnutrition especially in the remote and mountainous areas.

It is difficult to accurately estimate the damage caused by COVID-19 in North Korea. However, considering that North Korea-China trade accounts for an absolute proportion of North Korea's foreign trade, the closure of the border between North Korea and China due to the coronavirus outbreak is significantly impacting trade between the two countries. The ongoing economic sanctions and spread of COVID-19 have virtually blocked the channel of economic activity in North Korea, and this crisis is exacerbating the national financial situation.<sup>49</sup> Trade between North Korea and China declined sharply

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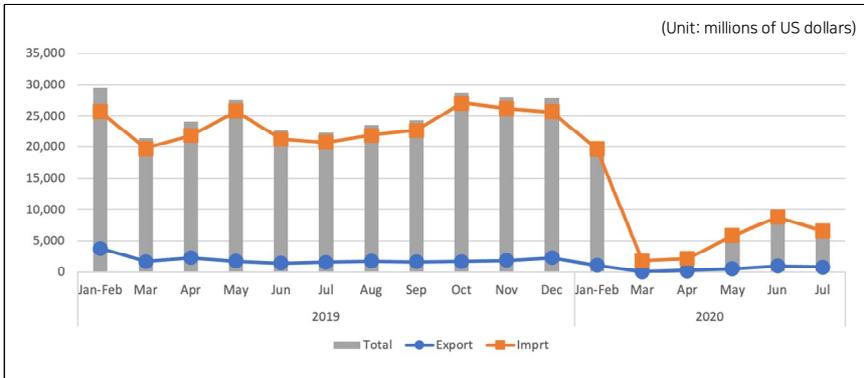
72&thisPage=1&biblioId=1532203.

48 UN, Human Right Council, "Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," May 1, 2020. A/HRC/43/58, 17.

49 Thomas Byrne, "The Coronavirus Has Pushed North Korea's Economy to the Edge," *Foreign Policy*, April 27, 2020.

after measures were imposed to close the border between North Korea and China in January 2020 due to the spread of the coronavirus.

**<Figure 1> Trend of North Korea–China Trade**



Sources: Chinese Customs, Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency, Industrial Bank of Korea.

North Korea-China trade, which declined significantly in March 2020, rebounded in May and June. However, it is expected that the significant decline in imports from China in the first half of this year will have harmed the economic situation in North Korea and the lives of its residents.

#### **4.3 Crisis in North Korea: Health Security Crisis Due to Deteriorating Humanitarian Situation**

The chronic food shortage in North Korea and the nutritional and health problems of the vulnerable are directly related to the health security of the entire Korean Peninsula, not just the food and health rights of the North Korean people. According to a joint emergency food security assessment of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Program (WFP) in 2019, 10.1 million inhabitants, or 40% of the total population, are experiencing food insecurity, so food supply is considered urgent.<sup>50</sup> North Korea has closed its border and suspended cross-border trade with China as a virus prevention measure. However, such a containment measure inevitably causes great

difficulties in importing food, leading to a faster depletion of domestic food stocks.<sup>51</sup> In the case of a prolonged pandemic and the continuation of stringent containment measures, the most serious social and economic impacts of COVID-19 in North Korea will be felt by young women, children and nutritionally vulnerable groups.

According to the 2020 World Food Security and Nutrition Status' report published by five international organizations under the United Nations, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Food Program (WFP), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and World Health Organization (WHO), the prevalence of undernourishment (PoU) of the total population of North Korea in 2017-2019 was 47.6%, indicating that 12.2 million North Koreans were undernourished.<sup>52</sup> This rate was the second-highest in the surveyed countries after Haiti (48.2%), indicating a very high level. In 2019, the rate of stunting under 5 years of age was 19.1% and the rate of acute wasting under 5 years of age was 4.0%, respectively.<sup>53</sup> These results are pre-coronavirus, and the food and nutritional state of North Korea is expected to worsen in 2020.

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50 OCHA, "DPR Korea Needs and Priorities 2020" (New York, 2020), 14.

51 FAO, The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Revised Humanitarian Response (May–December 2020): Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Rome, 2020).

52 FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020* (Rome: FAO, 2020).

53 UNICEF, *Analysis of the Situation of Women and Children in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Pyongyang: UNICEF, 2019).

<Table 1> Key Indicators of the State of Nutrition in North and South Korea

(Unit: %)

	Prevalence of Undernourishment in the Total Population		Prevalence of Wasting in Children (Under 5 Years of Age)		Prevalence of Stunting in Children (Under 5 Years of Age)	
	2004-06	2017-19	2016	2019	2016	2019
World	12.5	8.8	7.7	6.9	22.9	21.3
Eastern Asia <sup>1</sup>	7.7	< 2.5	8.9	1.7	25.8	4.5
DPRK	33.9	47.6	4.0	4.0	27.9	19.1
ROK	2.5	< 2.5	1.2	1.2	2.5	n.a

<sup>1</sup>: China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Republic of Korea, Japan, Mongolia

Sources: FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020*

In particular, the problem of access to food for the vulnerable is a cause of malnutrition and mortality of mothers and children in North Korea. In 2017, the rate of maternal mortality in North Korea was 89 per 100,000 births, which has decreased somewhat since the 2000s but is eight times higher than that of 11 in South Korea.<sup>54</sup> In 2018, the death rate of children under the age of 5 in North Korea was 18 per 1,000 births, six times higher than that of 3 in South Korea.<sup>55</sup>

In terms of infectious diseases, North Korea is also vulnerable to tuberculosis and malaria. According to WHO statistics, in 2018, the mortality rate for TB (HIV-negative TB mortality) in North Korea was 80 per 100,000, and 20,000 deaths were reported. These results are worse than what they were in 2015 when the tuberculosis death rate was 61 per 100,000 with 15,000 recorded deaths. Globally, as of 2018, North Korea has been among the top 30 countries in the number of TB and MDR/RR-TB incidences.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and UNPD, *Trends in Maternal Mortality 2000 to 2017* (Geneva: WHO, 2019).

<sup>55</sup> UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (UN IGME), *Levels & Trends in Child Mortality* (New York: UNICEF, 2019).

<sup>56</sup> WHO, *Global Tuberculosis Report 2019* (Geneva: WHO, 2019), 198.

Importantly, the deteriorating medical system and health situation in North Korea may not only be a problem for North Korea, but also a problem for the entire Korean Peninsula. First of all, it is necessary to focus on improving the nutritional and health conditions of the vulnerable in North Korea, but attention should be paid to the gap between the two Koreas on the right to health and the potential impacts it may have, especially on diseases. Currently, the problem is that North Korea taking strong preventive action against COVID-19 allows very restricted access to aid workers from the United Nations entities.<sup>57</sup> Pyongyang also refuses Seoul's food aid donation through WFP.<sup>58</sup> If the North Korean authorities keep their borders on lockdown and impose restrictions on humanitarian operations, the conditions of vulnerable households who are already suffering from food shortage, malnutrition and disruption in education will seriously deteriorate. The prolonged containment measures and delayed assistance to people in need will likely have a sizable effect on the entire Peninsula.

The South Korean government has halted food aid to the North since 2010, and the government's humanitarian aid toward mother and child health services in North Korea through UNICEF, WFP, and WHO is no longer provided. The Global Fund, which played a key role in the tuberculosis project in North Korea, also stopped providing support between February 2018 and September 2019, and North Korea's tuberculosis management is in a considerable crisis. It is estimated that the food and health conditions in North Korea have worsened as borders are controlled and importing goods has become difficult in the COVID-19 crisis. In this sense, the COVID-19 crisis has caused a huge demand for humanitarian and developmental assistance including test kits, medical equipment, critical WASH supplies. However, funding for support of the government's COVID-19 preparedness and response is challenging to obtain. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA),

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57 UN, Human Rights Council, "Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," February 24 - March 20, 2020, A/HRC/43/58.

58 In 2019 the South Korean administration decided to provide food assistance (50,000 tons of domestic rice) to North Korea, but the delivery of food aid was suspended as North Korean government halted its negotiation with WFP.

in the face of the COVID-19 crisis, North Korea reportedly needs 39.7 million US dollars, but the funding to North Korea has reached only 3.5 million US dollars, covering 9 percent of what they need.<sup>59</sup>

**<Table 2> North Korea’s Intersectoral COVID Response Plan 2020**

(Unit: US dollars)

Source	Destination	Field	Amount	Funding status
Switzerland	Swiss Development Cooperation//Swiss Humanitarian Aid	Health COVID-19	123,839	Commitment
	UNICEF	Health COVID-19, Nutrition COVID-19	1,103,753	Commitment
Central Emergency Response Fund	WHO	Health COVID-19	899,998	Paid Contribution
Germany	WHO	Health COVID-19	500,000	Commitment
Republic of Korea	UNICEF		400,000	Paid Contribution
Sweden	Swedish Red Cross		279,665	Commitment
United Kingdom	WHO	Health COVID-19	100,000	Commitment
Canada	WHO	Health COVID-19	100,000	Paid Contribution
COVID-19 Humanitarian Thematic Fund	UNICEF		53,307	Paid Contribution
	Total		3,560,562	

Sources: OCHA, FTS

59 OCHA, Financial Tracking Service (FTS), DPRK, accessed October 20, 2020, <https://fts.unocha.org>.

## V. Inter-Korean Cooperation for Sustainable Development

### 5.1 Opportunity and Challenge in South Korea's Policy toward North Korea

The Moon Jae-in administration is emphasizing peace on the Korean Peninsula through peaceful means of expanding dialogue and contact. The core strategy of the Moon Jae-in administration is 'peace economy,' which emphasizes peace development through inter-Korean economic cooperation and a virtuous cycle of peace and economic cooperation.<sup>60</sup> One of the Moon Jae-in government's national tasks, the 'New Economic Map of the Korean Peninsula,' is also being promoted in this context, and for this, cooperation between North and South Korea and cooperation with the international community are essential.

Recently, however, North Korea has increased its level of provocation toward South Korea by publicly denouncing the sending of anti-Pyongyang leaflets and destroying the Inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office, and so the agreement between the two Koreas and the implementation of a peaceful economy is expected to be rather difficult. Lately, the demand for inter-Korean cooperation in non-traditional security fields such as human and livestock infectious diseases, disaster and climate change is increasing. In addition, it is worth paying attention to the fact that North Korea has expressed its willingness to actively participate in the implementation of the UN's SDGs. It is likely that the coronavirus pandemic, in the first half of 2020, will have harmed North Korea in terms of foreign trade and the general public economy, so a new awareness and response to the changing external environment are required.

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60 Address by President Moon Jae-in on Korea's 74<sup>th</sup> Liberation Day, August 15, 2019, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://english1.president.go.kr/Briefingspeeches/Speeches/638>.

## 5.2 UN's SDGs: An Opportunity for Inter-Korean Cooperation?<sup>61</sup>

North Korea has expressed its willingness to actively participate in the realization and implementation of the SDGs, which the UN member states newly agreed to achieve by 2030.<sup>62</sup> On April 21, 2016, at the United Nations High-level Thematic Debate on Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, Ri Su-yong, who is the Minister for Foreign Affairs of DPRK, stated that: "I reaffirm the commitment of the DPRK to actively join the international efforts towards achieving the SDGs, despite the grave situation prevailing on the Korean Peninsula."<sup>63</sup> North Korea's attitude and position towards the UN's SDGs has been consistently confirmed thereafter. Most recently, addressing the United Nations General Assembly held on September 30, 2019, DPRK ambassador Kim Song stated, "The Government and the people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are now actively striving to fulfill the 2030 Agenda and achieve the SDGs through our vigorous struggle to build a powerful socialist country."<sup>64</sup>

The basic premise of sustainable development is that economic development should take into account social fairness and environmental sustainability in a balanced way. Notably, North Korea's commitment to and implementation of the UN's SDGs requires multilateral cooperation and communication with international organizations, donors, and international NGOs, and involves sharing

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61 For a more detailed discussion, see Gyubin Choi, "North Korea's Perceptions and Reactions to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)," *North Korean Studies Review*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2020): 93-119.

62 Su Yong Ri, "Statement by H.E. Mr. Ri Su Yong, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the United Nations Summit for the Adoption of the Post-2015 Development Agenda," September 27, 2015, accessed September 19, 2020, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21023dprk.pdf>.

63 "Statement by H.E. Mr. Ri Su Yong Minister for Foreign Affairs of The Democratic People's Republic of Korea At the United Nations High-Level Thematic Debate on Achieving Sustainable Development Goals," New York, April 21, 2016, accessed September 19, 2020, <http://statements.unmeetings.org/media2/7657570/dprk.pdf>.

64 United Nations, General Assembly, "Seventy-fourth session, 13<sup>th</sup> plenary meeting," September 30, 2019, A/74/PV.13.

international norms and acceptance of a global development system. In this regard, North Korea's response and participation in the UN's SDGs could serve as an opportunity to expand development cooperation, diversifying inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation, and contributing to the improvement of the lives of North Koreans.

SDGs will also be an important agenda for the South Korean government until 2030. The South Korean government has reported the implementation of SDGs once to the UN in 2016 and is making efforts to implement the SDGs by establishing K-SDGs. At the 74<sup>th</sup> Session of UN General Assembly on September 24, 2019, President Moon Jae-in mentioned in his speech that "the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations and the Paris Agreement on climate change are major tasks that we must achieve through multilateral cooperation."<sup>65</sup> South Korea also has plans to more than double the proportion of Official Development Assistance by 2030.<sup>66</sup>

North Korea's interest in the 'Post-2015 Development Agenda' and the implementation of the SDGs may be closely linked to North Korea's economic development, improvement of the quality of life of North Koreans, joint cooperation between the two Koreas, and 'sustaining peace' on the Korean Peninsula. Of course, without the easing of sanctions on or progress in denuclearization, international cooperation for the implementation of North Korea's SDGs will prove to be very difficult. Nevertheless, efforts are needed to derive areas in which the two Koreas can jointly pursue cooperation in non-traditional security agendas. Considering that Kim Jong Un's regime is keen on reaching the SDGs, it is necessary for Seoul to support agendas which Pyongyang prioritizes when implementing the SDGs. North Korea's domestic needs and strategic priorities are more likely to have to do with SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), SDG 7 (clean energy), SDG 11

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65 Jae-in Moon, "Address by President Moon Jae-in at 74<sup>th</sup> Session of United Nations General Assembly," September 15, 2019, <https://english1.president.go.kr/BriefingSpeeches/InterKoreanRelations/664>.

66 Jae-in Moon, "Remarks by President Moon Jae-in as Lead Speaker at Third Session of 14<sup>th</sup> G20 Summit," June 29, 2019, <https://english1.president.go.kr/Briefingspeeches/Speeches/617>.

(sustainable cities and communities), and SDG 15 (life on land).<sup>67</sup> These priority tasks of the SDGs in North Korea are closely related to the enhancement of human, health, and environmental security. Along with this, the South Korean government needs to devise cooperative measures by reviewing the contents of the Voluntary Nationality Review (VNR), in which North Korea will report its implementation of SDGs in a 2021 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF).

North Korea recognizes that sustainable development is only possible when it overcomes prolonged food shortage and poverty, along with resource scarcity, environmental pollution, and the energy crisis. Therefore, South Korea should actively support North Korea's implementation of the SDGs by 2030 and seek diversified inter-Korean and international cooperation projects.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The security surrounding the Korean Peninsula until now has mainly focused on resolving the nuclear problem, deterring military conflict, and doing the internal and external balancing. However, in recent years, the importance of non-traditional security agendas such as hygiene, health, environment, and energy is gradually increasing. The COVID-19 crisis clearly shows that the widespread nature of the virus can threaten the safety of the countries and the lives of citizens across national boundaries, revealing the importance of understanding and responding to the new security crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

The COVID-19 outbreak is not only aggravating problems in the economic field, with chronic food shortages in North Korea and shrinking trade between North Korea and China, but it is also becoming a factor that may further isolate North Korea from the international community. To overcome this,

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<sup>67</sup> DPRK, "Presentation of the Implementation of SDGs in DPR Korea North East Asian Multistakeholder Forum," North-East Asian Multistakeholder Forum on Sustainable Development Goals, Vladivostok, October 15-16, 2019.

it is most urgent that North Korea should accept international cooperation to cope with the prolonged coronavirus infection, to respond to urgent healthcare needs and show a changed attitude to promote human rights within North Korea. Tomás Ojea Quintana, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in North Korea, has also recently pointed out this issue.<sup>68</sup>

There is a need for South Korea to establish a new model for international cooperation to alleviate the humanitarian situation in North Korea. Since the chronic food shortages and nutrition and health problems of the vulnerable are directly related to human and health security on the Korean Peninsula, it is necessary to establish a cooperation plan at the inter-Korean and international level. So far, due to the tendency to limit inter-Korean exchange and cooperation to the scope of economic exchange, humanitarian aid, and social and cultural exchange, it is difficult to reflect North Korea's demands and priorities. Nor is it easy to encompass a comprehensive range of development cooperation that can affect the entire Korean Peninsula.

In preparation for a drastic change in inter-Korean relations and the easing of sanctions against North Korea, there needs to be a continuation of reorganizing exchanges and cooperation at the inter-Korean level and expanding and developing existing cooperative projects. At the same time, it is also significant to find acceptable cooperative measures for North Korea and to make cooperation sustainable through universal norms and principles. In this respect, South Korea needs to develop bilateral exchange and cooperation with North Korea at the levels of central and local governments and NGOs. Meanwhile South Korea needs to support North Korea's implementation of SDGs and consider and prepare for active cooperation with the international community.

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68 OHCHR, "DPRK: Humanitarian Concerns Growing amid COVID-19 Responses, Says UN Expert," June 9, 2020, accessed September 25, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25941&LangID=E>.

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