

North Korea Reopens (Selectively)

October 25, 2023

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, North Korea (officially the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) almost completely sealed off its borders and refrained from virtually all diplomatic interaction. In 2023, North Korea has ended that isolation by engaging with Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC or China). North Korea and Russia have exchanged high-level delegations, including a week-long trip to Russia by DPRK leader Kim Jong-un, and appear to have upgraded their cooperation, including reports of [DPRK weapons transfers to Russia](#). North Korea's trade with other countries, principally China, has nearly recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

The opening appears limited to Russia, China, and [DPRK citizens living abroad](#), whom North Korea had prohibited from returning since early 2020. Pyongyang has rejected U.S. and South Korean attempts to communicate. The reopening potentially has implications for Russia's war against Ukraine, the viability of sanctions against North Korea, North Korea's humanitarian and refugee situations, and possible future U.S.-DPRK dialogue.

Diplomatic Reopening

In September 2023, [Kim traveled to Russia's Far East](#), where he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and visited Russia's newest spaceport, a [factory producing advanced jets](#), and [Russia's Pacific Fleet](#) in Vladivostok. Reportedly, Putin agreed to a reciprocal visit to North Korea and said Russia is prepared to [help North Korea build and perhaps launch satellites](#). In October 2023, the Biden Administration released satellite imagery it says is evidence of North Korea shipping to Russia over 1,000 containers of "[military equipment and munitions](#)" that arrived at an ammunition depot near the Russia-Ukraine border. High-level Russian delegations, led by the Russian [Defense Minister](#) and [Foreign Minister](#), visited Pyongyang in July and October, respectively. Lavrov reportedly announced bilateral relations have reached a "qualitatively new, strategic level." Also in 2023, North Korea allowed both the [PRC](#) and [Russian embassies](#) to bring in diplomats for the first time since early 2020.

Commercial Reopening

After a sharp decline in trade in 2020, North Korea's estimated trade rebounded in the first half of 2023, nearly returning to pre-COVID-19 levels. In the four years before the pandemic, DPRK trade had

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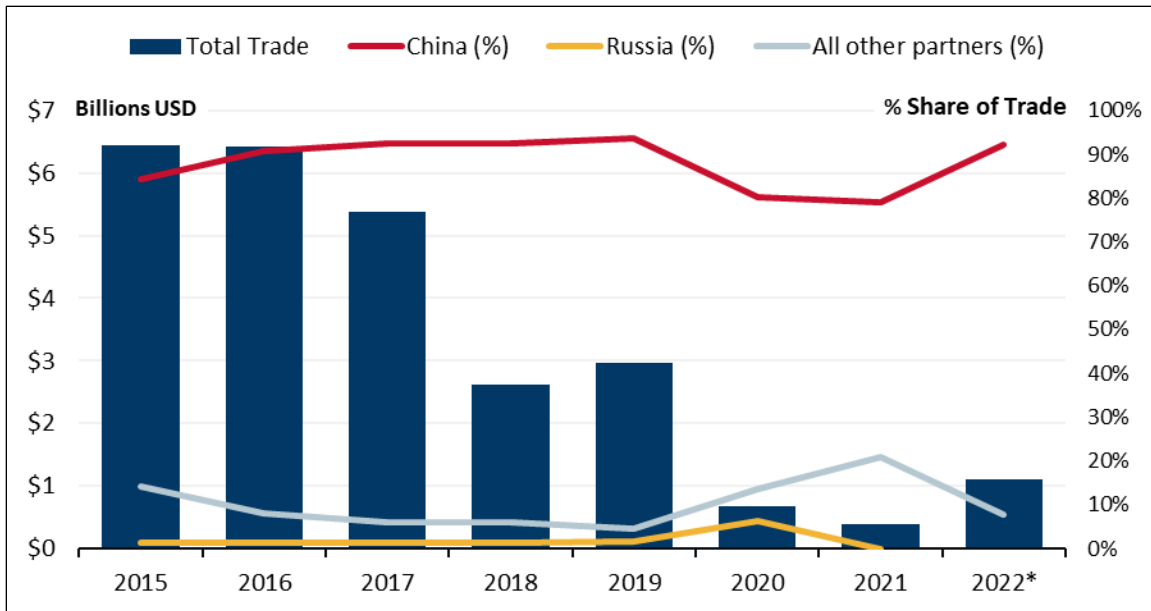
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contracted by over 50%, following the implementation of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions in 2016. Pandemic-related border closures in 2020 further reduced DPRK trade (**Figure 1**). During 2022, North Korea began to reopen the border intermittently, and resumed rail trade with [China](#) and [Russia](#), North Korea's top two trade partners. The trade rebound continued strongly into 2023 (**Figure 2**). According to available customs data, food, agriculture, and fertilizer imports comprised a major component of DPRK's imports in the first half of 2023. DPRK's top 2023 exports have been [wigs](#) and false eyelashes, to China.

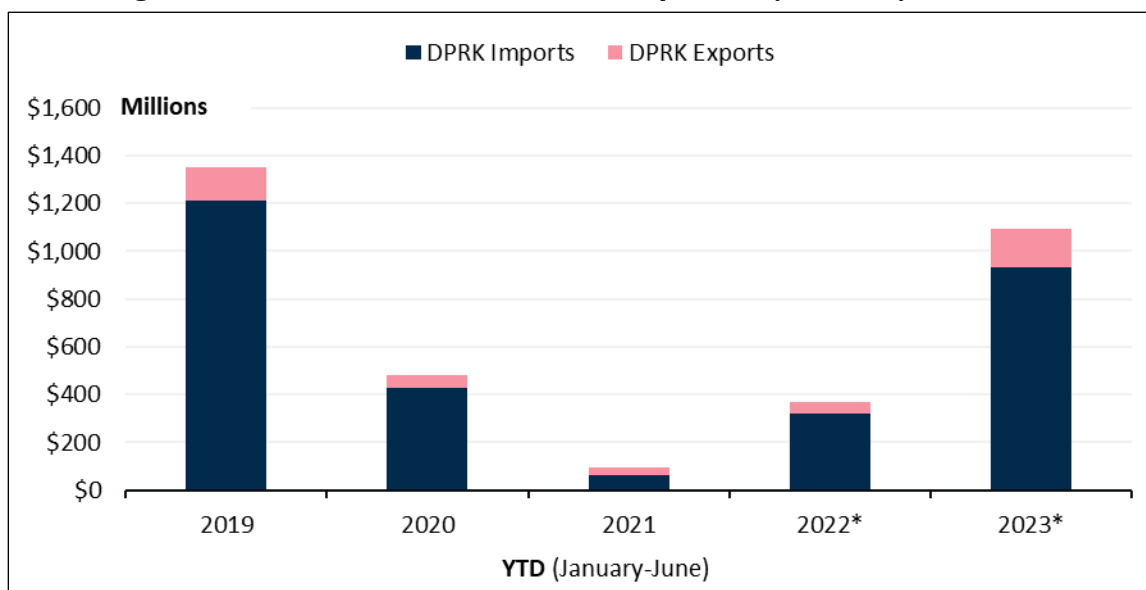
Figure 1. North Korea's Estimated Trade: 2015-2022

\$US Billions and % Share by Partners



Source: Compiled from Trade Data Monitor of all reporting countries' exports and imports with North Korea.

* Russia stopped reporting trade data in March 2022. From 2015 through 2021, Russia averaged less than 2% of North Korean total trade.

Figure 2. DPRK Trade: Year-to-Date Comparison (Jan.-June), 2019-2023

Source: Compiled from Trade Data Monitor of all reporting countries' exports and imports with North Korea.

* Russia stopped reporting trade data in March 2022.

Possible Implications

North Korea's reopening raises several issues for Members of Congress to consider as they oversee and help set U.S. North Korea policy, through holding hearings, debating appropriations amounts and priorities, debating sanctions legislation, and considering authorization legislation (e.g., the National Defense Authorization Act and the North Korea Human Rights Act):

- The significance of increased DPRK-Russia strategic cooperation.** U.S. officials and military analysts debate the extent to which North Korea's reported shipments of ammunition will make a difference in Russia's war against Ukraine. Another question is whether Russia will provide North Korea with equipment that will boost North Korea's capabilities and/or embolden Kim to become more assertive.
- North Korea sanctions evasion.** Shifts in the regional and international system—Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and increased U.S.-China rivalry—appear to be boosting Kim's ability to evade UNSC sanctions and limiting Beijing's and Moscow's willingness to implement sanctions on Pyongyang. China and Russia vetoed U.S.-led efforts at the UNSC to adopt stricter sanctions on Pyongyang after the DPRK's intercontinental ballistic missile tests, suggesting North Korea may be benefiting from the contemporary geopolitical environment. Weakening sanctions enforcement could allow North Korea to resume arms transfers; in the past, North Korea was accused of supplying weapons to Hamas and Hezbollah, among other bad actors.
- China and North Korean refugees.** News reports in fall 2023 indicated China had begun forcibly repatriating hundreds of North Korean refugees who were detained during North Korea's COVID-19 border closure and were a focus of a June 2023 congressional hearing. In the past, repatriated North Koreans have been tortured, sentenced to forced labor, and/or executed. Multiple reports suggest the DPRK may have used COVID-19 as a pretext to build new barriers and expand patrols along the DPRK-China border.

- **Increased food imports into North Korea.** It is not yet clear to what extent North Korea's partial border opening, which has facilitated [imports of food](#) and [fertilizer](#), will ease the country's internal humanitarian difficulties. Since at least the early 1990s, North Korea has run a chronic food deficit, which its COVID-19-related border closure worsened. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization in 2023 estimated that [nearly half the population is undernourished](#). (Meanwhile, North Korea's [military spending](#) is estimated to be 20%-30% of its GDP.) The border reopening could allow future humanitarian aid, which some Members of Congress have advocated.
- **A future diplomatic opening?** Tensions are high on the Korean Peninsula, due to [DPRK missile tests](#) and the United States' and South Korea's efforts to [boost their deterrent posture](#). Since 2019, Pyongyang largely has ignored U.S. and South Korean outreach, including offers of humanitarian assistance and attempts to communicate. The end to North Korea's self-imposed isolation removes a logistical obstacle to dialogue, should Kim Jong-un decide to engage. In the past, North Korea has [pivoted](#) to diplomatic outreach following periods of tension.

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