

North korea climate change

In recent years, North Korea - the so-called "hermit kingdom" - has been feeling the effects of a global problem. Climate change has been wreaking havoc, with severe flooding, droughts and extreme weather events like typhoons, all exacerbated by deforestation and desertification, damaging the country's already struggling economy, infrastructure and agricultural systems.

The threat of climate change-related famine has far-reaching consequences. The Arduous March famine in the 1990s killed as many as 3.5 million people, traumatising a generation and loosening ties between state and citizens as ordinary people relied on each other or foreign aid for food. A famine of a similar scale could lead to mass death and internal and external migration, and erode loyalty to the state, causing regime instability.

Such instability would likely play out in one of three ways. In one scenario, the regime of Kim Jong-Un would be under stress but would muddle through, maintaining some level of stability. In another, there could be a rebellion or elite coup, which could either result in a stable transition of power or escalate into violent conflict. Perhaps the most concerning possibility is that famine and social upheaval of this scale could lead to the collapse of North Korea.

Furthermore, if North Korea collapses or is perceived to be particularly vulnerable, neighbouring states may wish to take advantage of this weakness. The remnants of North Korea would make for prime geopolitical real estate in the region and would risk sparking a great power conflict that has the potential to escalate far beyond the Korean peninsula. Tackling the impact of climate change in North Korea is therefore imperative.

Climate change, by its very nature an existential issue, threatens the future interests of all states, a fact which North Korea appears to recognise. It is therefore a challenge that cannot be addressed at a national level alone and requires global involvement. This presents a unique opportunity for collaboration, including in the case of North Korea.

Due to its geopolitical and economic isolation, North Korea has a very small carbon footprint and has even reduced its carbon emissions by 70% since 1990, though this is largely due to its economic decline over the last three decades. It would therefore take minimal investment to help the country transition to a zero-carbon economy. North Korea seems to recognise the opportunity here and has pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 15.63% by 2030, rising to 50.34% if it receives international assistance.

Technology transfers for renewable energy projects would not violate the current UN Security Council sanctions regime, making such assistance possible. Moreover, a move towards renewable energy could help stabilise the country, reducing the risk of spiralling tensions by mitigating the country's energy security issues. Collaborating with North Korea on renewable energy projects could therefore be a relatively simple and mutually beneficial way to build bridges.

North Korea continues to engage with the UN, the EU and South Korea on these issues, and is also a party to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. While North Korea's level of commitment to these agreements remains to be seen, the country's rhetoric suggests that it is ready to take action, with a statement in 2017 labelling global warming "one of the gravest challenges humankind is facing today".

Despite this, the coronavirus pandemic has put climate change mitigation efforts on the backburner. Most NGOs left North Korea as the country imposed some of the world's strictest border closures, and in 2022, while many of us hope to move on from the pandemic, the situation in North Korea is thought to be deteriorating.

Environmental NGOs are key to this work, so ensuring they can return to North Korea is vital. This is easier said than done given North Korea's reluctance to accept international support, including vaccines, to tackle the coronavirus pandemic. However, the international community should resist the urge to close the door on pandemic-related support and should maintain an awareness that North Korea's response to the pandemic is inevitably connected to its ability to act on climate change.

Therefore, while climate change remains a key threat to North Korea in the coming years, all is not lost. Although climate change has the potential to push North Korea to extremes of instability, it also holds myriad opportunities for cooperation and collaboration. Under the right conditions and with careful handling, these opportunities could serve as a de-isolation strategy and reduce hostility in the Korean peninsula and beyond.

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