Two factors have the greatest impact on the development of relations between the two countries: the coronavirus pandemic, which is hitting economic ties very hard (the closure of borders has caused more damage to the North Korean economy than international sanctions), and the international situation, which continues to position the tactical alliance of the two countries as an unbreakable friendship of two socialist countries and brotherly parties.

In October 2020, Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping exchanged congratulatory letters. On October 10, Xi congratulated Kim on the 75th anniversary of the founding of the WPK and promised to make efforts to further develop relations between the two countries and support the North's struggle to advance its socialist agenda.

On October 22, 2020, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Chinese People's Volunteers' entry into the 1950-53 Korean War, Kim Jong-un visited a cemetery in Huchang County, South Pyongyang Province, and paid his respects to the fallen. A separate basket of flowers was laid on the grave of Mao Anying, son of Mao Zedong, who died during the conflict. Kim sent another basket to the Friendship Tower in Pyongyang, which symbolizes the ties between the two countries.

On October 25, the Rodong Sinmun editorial also noted that the participation of the volunteers was an expression of friendship and camaraderie between the two countries bound by fate.
Note that attention to the war is increasing on the other shore as well. As Xinhua News Agency reported on Sept. 19, the Memorial Hall for the Resistance to American Aggression and Korean Support in the Korean War was reopened in Liaoning Province in northeastern China. The exhibition area has been expanded from 5,400 to 23,845 square meters, and the number of exhibits has grown from just over 700 to more than 1,600.

On October 29, President Xi thanked Kim for his congratulatory message on the occasion of the 71st anniversary of the founding of the PRC. Xi reiterated that "China and Korea are connected as rivers and mountains, friendly neighbors."

On the day of the U.S. presidential election, Pyongyang demonstrated the friendliness of its relations with Beijing. The November 4, 2020 edition of the Thonil Shinbo published an article talking about the special relationship and the strength of friendship.

On January 12, 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping sent a congratulatory message to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on his election as general secretary of the ruling party and expressed his will to "protect regional peace and stability, development and prosperity, strengthening relations at a time of "turmoil and change."

On February 3, 2021, the Minju Joseon newspaper published an op-ed titled "China-US Confrontation Becoming More Explicit" on the sanctions against 28 high-ranking U.S. officials of the outgoing administration. The text shares Beijing's position that the decision demonstrates China's determination to defend its national interests, noting that representatives of the new administration (the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Treasury, and the head of national intelligence) "unanimously called China the main threat to the United States". This leads to the conclusion that "the current U.S. administration will further increase pressure on China, and the latter in turn will fight back hard. Consequently, the Sino-American confrontation, which has shown itself, will continue in the future".

It is also worth noting the staff appointments. Kim Sung-nam, the new head of the WPK Central Committee's international department, is a sinologist. Then, Ji Jae-ryn, who had been ambassador to Beijing since 2010, was succeeded by Lee Yong-nam, who served as minister of trade in 2008 and minister of foreign economic relations until 2016. Until recently, he served as North Korea's Deputy Prime Minister for Foreign Trade. According to the ROK, the appointment may be aimed at strengthening economic ties and cooperation with North Korea's largest trading partner.

As for economic ties between the two countries, on the one hand, the share of China as a trade partner is growing, but on the other hand, due to the tightening of border controls imposed to prevent the outbreak of COVID-19, the total volume of trade between North Korea and China has decreased significantly. According to data, provided by China Customs, released on February 12, 2021, it was $539 million 100 thousand dollars in 2020, down 80.7% from the previous year. North Korean imports from China totaled $491 million 100,000, down 80.9 percent from 2019. North Korean shipments to China totaled only $48 million, down 77.7% from a year earlier.

It is noted that since last summer there has been virtually no truck or train traffic between China's Dandong and North Korea's Sinuiju.

The NKNews portal claims that supermarkets and stores in Pyongyang have been short of foreign-made staples, including coffee, cocoa, and chocolate, for months, and the Rodong Sinmun warns against "importomania".

According to World Health Organization and UNICEF officials, shipments of medical and agricultural aid, normally made through the Dandong-Sinuiju land route and the Dalian-Nampo sea route, have been largely suspended since the summer of 2020. At that time, Kim Jong-un stated that the country could not accept aid related to flood damage because these supplies might be contaminated by a virus. Unfortunately, there are reasons for this fear - there has indeed been talk of contamination by the virus among far-right renegade organizations.

Rumors that communication between the countries would resume appeared periodically, but remained rumors. On October 26, 2020, the Daily NK news portal reported that Pyongyang and Beijing had reached an agreement to resume train traffic across the border. However, according to Yo Sang-gi of the Ministry of Reunification of the ROK, the situation did not reveal any noticeable changes.

That said, there are examples to the contrary. According to military technology analysts who spoke to NK News, North Korea likely violated international sanctions by importing Chinese drones to film its massive military parade on October 10. For example, while watching a North Korean broadcast of a military parade, they spotted at least one Chinese-made DJI Mavic 2 drone.
The cessation of exports to China primarily affected custom-made items such as watches, wigs, shoes, and other goods. At the same time, exports of co-generated hydropower and graphite in small quantities did not stop, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Imports of food and medical goods from China were suspended, while imports of raw materials and construction materials continued in small quantities.

China's share of the North's foreign trade rose from 17% in 2001 to 90% in 2014, and last year it reached 95%.

Even though KDI says North Korea's total trade with China reached $2.8 billion in 2019, less than half the $5.8 billion in 2016 — before sanctions were tightened, KOTRA says trade with China rose to 94.8 percent of the North's total foreign trade.

How will events develop next? The author very much hopes that when Pyongyang receives the vaccines, they will be able to use them for both quarantine station staff handling goods from abroad and for specialists traveling abroad. After that, the "self-blockade" will be lifted and trade both with China and other countries will begin to recover.

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