On Why Foreign Diplomats Flee Pyongyang

First, on March 18, 2021, NK News reported that there were no foreign UN or international NGO workers left in North Korea. About two dozen citizens of the Czech Republic, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Vietnam, as well as two employees of the World Food Program (WFP), left the country. They left Pyongyang for China.

And on April 1, 2021 the Russian embassy in Pyongyang congratulated its colleagues on the end of the two-week quarantine in China and summed up some results - at the moment there are fewer than 290 foreigners in the DPRK. Due to strict quarantine measures and lack of essential goods, the embassies of 12 countries, including Great Britain, Venezuela, Brazil, Germany, Italy, Nigeria, Pakistan, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, the Czech Republic and France, were closed. Only nine ambassadors and four chargé d'affaires now represent their states, with embassy staff reduced to a minimum. Representatives of international humanitarian organizations have also almost completely left the country.

According to the embassy, those who left can be understood — “not everyone can withstand the unprecedentedly strict total restriction, the sharpest shortage of essential goods, including medicine, the lack of possibility to solve health problems”.

Russian diplomats also “have a hard enough time. There are many problems, and several families had to interrupt their business trips for various reasons. But the personnel’s ability to work is fully preserved.” Of course, the Western and South Korean press quoted only the passage about restrictions and scarcity, juxtaposing it with the notorious story about a group of Russian embassy staff crossing the border over a railroad bridge. Footage of Russian embassy employees walking on rails and pushing a cart with their luggage and children sitting on it went
viral all over the Internet as an illustration of the terrible living conditions of foreign diplomats in North Korea amid the coronavirus pandemic. Western propaganda hinted that the plight of foreigners in North Korea is nothing compared to the terrible situation of the people, and that foreigners are being expelled on purpose so that no one will know about the famine in the country, which is comparable in scale to the disasters of the 1990s.

In addition to blatantly anti-Pyongyang propaganda coming from sources that the author does not even want to name again, this flight of “fakes” was partly built on the use of omissions: if one does not know the specifics of the situation, they will make them up based on some general notions. One of them, for example, concerns the word “embassy”. The reader will immediately picture an image of a large fenced area, which may have several residential buildings for employees, its own boiler room, a warehouse or a school for children. All this is in the Russian and Chinese embassies in Pyongyang, but these are countries that have longstanding ties and real interests with the DPRK. Most other diplomatic missions are located within the diplomatic quarter, which of course has its own store with foreign goods and its own hospital, but the embassy staff may be very small and in some cases actually consist of an ambassador, an accountant, a secretary and an interpreter.

Of course, when North Korea imposed an almost total import ban in August 2020, it was a very challenging time for diplomats. Contacts with North Korean officials have drastically decreased, there is limited access to the city, and the usual food has run out. And while Russian diplomats, most of whom are professional Korean experts, have no problem consuming local food, some Western diplomats may have a hard time eating it. In addition, the ban on imports also applies to drugs, which means that people with chronic diseases could simply run out of pills that they need to take for vital requirements. Consequently, it is necessary to return to the homeland.

North Korean authorities periodically organize extraction flights for foreign diplomats, but after air service was also cut off, the only option is to evacuate by bus to the Chinese border town of Dandong. There, the diplomats are quarantined for two or three weeks, after which they are free to go home. It should be noted, however, that Beijing-Moscow or Shanghai-Moscow flights are still irregular, and for emergency evacuations this option is poorly suited.

The second omission is due to the fact that, when talking about the border, it is assumed that it can be crossed or passed over relatively unhindered. Historically, however, the Russian Federation and the DPRK still have no automobile connection, but they do have railroad connections, even though there are no trains (as there are no planes either). That is why, after a certain period of coordination, an option was found that seemed ideal in terms of rapid evacuation. The Russians were brought to the border area, where they loaded their luggage and children onto a specially prepared cart, then walked about a mile and a half, and transport was waiting for them on the Russian side, after which they flew from Vladivostok to Moscow the next day. So there was really no special arrogance or desire to mock or humiliate the diplomats by making them walk.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which such border closures have affected the economic situation. The pictures from Pyongyang do not show this; the state is holding the prices of rice and gasoline, but according to Western observers from the NK News portal, prices of other products have gone up. According to claims, fresh fish has almost disappeared from the market, because the fishermen are not allowed to go to the sea for anti-epidemic reasons.

Of course, the author has already encountered the opinion that such tightening of the screws and voluntary blockade in the form of “the country’s transition to self-isolation” is actually a cunning plan of the insidious Kim Jong-un: they say, assessing the future policy of the Biden administration, the North Koreans realized that after a while the level of sanctions pressure will quite reach the blockade point, and in this situation a controlled lockdown is better than uncontrolled. The anti-epidemic measures are a good explanation for the masses, and with it, in foreign policy, North Korea has its hands untied. If the regime goes for a nuclear missile escalation in the face of worsening relations with the US and the ROK, “the tyrant will stick his tongue out to the entire international community, who cannot adequately punish him, because any level of sanctions pressure is still easier in its consequences than the situation in which the North Korean people are already in now.”

In the author’s opinion, there is some noble madness in this idea, but the harsh quarantine measures can be explained in another way. First, Kim Jong-un is well aware that with the weakness of North Korea’s health care system the epidemic will be hard to cope with, so it is important not to let the virus into the country at any cost. Second, because the virus has not yet been fully investigated, North Koreans assume that it could potentially be transmitted by all possible means, including water, migrating birds, and unsanitized objects. In such a situation, quarantine turns out to be a method with an obvious degree of reliability: let nothing in, isolate any suspicious people, don’t touch anything suspicious. Third, the protective reflex inherent in authoritarian regimes also suggests
such solutions to problems, especially since, unfortunately, the North Korean authorities have theoretical reasons to fear sabotage.

The author would like to once again recall that in an interview with the leftist South Korean newspaper Hangyore Sinmun in the summer of 2020, defector Hong Gang Chul openly said that anti-Pyongyang NGOs were seriously discussing the possibility of a biological diversion by sending not only leaflets but also items contaminated with the virus to North Korea. Although one can argue about the technical capabilities of those who contemplated such sabotage, the DPRK authorities cannot leave this point unattended.

So is there any light at the end? — At the beginning of April 2021, there was a round of rumors that air travel between Beijing and Pyongyang would soon be launched. Other unofficial sources say that North Korea has received some amount of vaccine, and that it will not be used primarily to vaccinate the elite, but rather those who travel abroad on duty, or those who deal with border trade. So, there is hope that in the near future the trade turnover between China and North Korea, which is almost nonexistent at the moment, will return to acceptable levels.

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