After a year and a half of interruption, North Korea has reopened rail connections with China.

Since the end of January 2020, the DPRK has halted cross-boarder railway services. Even though on June 26, 2020 one freight train passed from Hunchun (a border city in China’s Jilin province) to Tumangang station on the North Korea-Russian border, amid the rising epidemic the borders have remained closed.

State media have warned that the virus can be brought into the country by snow and dust, and nobody has been officially admitted into the country since March 2020. Vessels carrying imports have also had to undergo several weeks of quarantine outside ports for fear of contamination.

In July 2020, North Korean newspaper Rodong Sinmun called for the closer monitoring of imported goods to prevent the spread of coronavirus. This was prompted by an incident in which the virus was discovered on packing paper. Even then it was assumed that the border might only open again at some point between 2021 and 2022.

At around the same time, it was reported that North Korea had passed a law concerning the ‘decontamination of imports,’ ‘as a part of which the construction of decontamination centers began in regions close to the border. The largest of these even moved the Uiju airport not far from the Chinese border, where a special railway line was built. Judging from Planet Labs images, construction began around mid-February 2021 and was mostly completed by the end of March. However, on April 15 the facility did not appear to be completed or open. The complex consists of ten large warehouses, auxiliary buildings and five railway platforms. As is often the case with such facilities in the DPRK, it is not enough to construct a building; you also need to fill it with the appropriate equipment, which is not easy
under the sanctions.

On October 15, 2021, North Korea opened a key shipping route from the Chinese port of Dalian to Nampo to allow for the shipment of humanitarian aid. On November 8, local media broadcast footage in which a train from the PRC crossed a bridge over the Yalu River. However, the RK authorities advised them to wait, ‘as consultations between North Korea and China should be concluded beforehand’.

As a result, the author of the latest material on this topic noted that, despite rumors about the imminent opening of the border, it remained closed for now. But it seems that this situation began to change at the start of the year.

On January 1, the Japanese newspaper Yomiuri Shimbun reported on a supposed agreement to resume bilateral trade over land between Pyongyang and Beijing. The newspaper referred to sources from a number of North Korean trade representatives. It was affirmed that deliveries of dairy products, medical supplies and other goods would begin within the scope of the bilateral agreement, and the goods would be transported via Dandong-Sinuiju railway links. This issue was agreed by both sides in November 2021; however, due to quarantine measures the trade launch was postponed.

On January 16, 2022 a North Korean freight train crossed the railway bridge into China, although it wasn’t confirmed whether the train was bearing cargo. A second train arrived in Dandong on January 17, and at the same time a train, composed of at least 15 carriages with essential goods and medical supplies, set off from Dandong to Sinuiji. The third train to Dandong arrived a day later, and the author hopes that this is the beginning of a regular occurrence, even if it is one train a day. By this point, the resumption of train traffic was confirmed by a statement from the spokesperson of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zhao Lijian.

It is also worth noting that, prior to the resumption of shipments from PRC, a full vaccination program was conducted for several hundred workers in customs and related services. Furthermore, the source previously told NK News that the first shipment had been sent to test decontamination equipment for rail transport.

So what now? The Ministry of Unification of the South Korean government has declared that it will continue to monitor similar rail haulage operations and whether they will lead to the resumption of trade and the movement of people between the neighboring countries. Meanwhile, RK intelligent services assert that the border was being crossed each day by a train with 20 carriages.

As expected, the goods are transported along a special railway line to a large warehouse, where they are held in quarantine. This is on the site of the converted Uiju airport, along a 14-kilometer track that passes residential areas in North Korea. This indicates the confidence of the authorities that the train will not spread COVID-19 amongst the surrounding population.

This also suggests that, after unloading, the carriages of incoming trains can return to China without being subject to a lengthy quarantine. This reduces the number of carriages required for the operation.

According to satellite images taken on January 24, 2022, upon arrival the carriages are divided into groups along five separate unloading platforms, which are adjoined to five warehouses. The unloaded goods are quickly processed in large warehouses, before they are taken from the entrance to the opposite end of the building. Then, they are stored outside on the airport’s former runway. The time it takes for workers to process goods remains unclear, but the images indicate that it takes one or two days.

Theoretically, this means that the decontamination facility can continue to receive incoming goods on a daily basis without being overloaded until the first shipment, which arrived on January 17, has completed the decontamination process and is ready to be dispatched. Quarantined goods can be sent to other parts of the country daily or several times a week.

The duration of this process of decontamination and probable quarantine that imported goods undergo remains unknown, but it is most likely that it lasts from a fortnight to one month. It is also not clear whether these exports to the DPRK were humanitarian aid from China or purchased goods.

Let’s now address the reaction to the event and the partiality of experts. The comments that the author came across in the English-language media were divided into several groups in terms of content:

- The opening of the border speaks to the alarming breakdown of the economic system, on account of which the regime has been forced to accept foreign aid. However, it is unlikely that this is about helping a starving people,
but rather about luxury items, with whose distribution the regime is buying the loyalty of the elite.

- 20 carriages a day is negligible; such imports ‘won’t bring real relief to the inhabitants of North Korea, who are suffering from shortages of food and materials on the back of the administration’s strict policies in combatting COVID-19’.

- ‘It is unlikely that the long-awaited opening of the North Korean border will extend to Pyongyang’ and ‘it won’t pave the way for any possible progress in nuclear talks or the improvement of inter-Korean ties’.

- ‘This indicates a major shift in North Korea’s quarantine policy, which has so far focused on restrictive measures that strictly prohibit contact with the outside world. Now the international community must take more active steps by offering the North further humanitarian assistance. Offering vaccines against COVID-19 will help ease security concerns arising from the confrontation between the US and North Korea. Moon Jae-in’s administration should strengthen cooperation with the United States to create an atmosphere for dialogue and accelerate the delivery of humanitarian assistance to North Korea’.

- China is feeding its ally, but this will not last long; soon Pyongyang will violate the moratorium on nuclear weapons tests or launches of ICBMs, and, owing to its ingratitude, will certainly do it during the Beijing Olympics.

It seems to the author that the first step is always the hardest, and the decontamination facilities scheme is unlikely to work in the short term. But we mustn’t forget that the DPRK never allowed the pandemic to enter its borders, largely due to exceptional measures. Of course, myths and propaganda abound in relation to this, which we will analyze when the opportunity arises.

Konstantin Asmolov, PhD in History, leading research fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of the Far East at the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.