



CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACT CASE STUDY:

North Korea: Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation

SUMMARY

North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Un, has recognized and acknowledged the effects of climate change within North Korea and has taken steps towards mitigating impacts in the country.

OVERVIEW

- The impact of climate change in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) have prompted leader Kim Jong Un to call for action against climate change.
- Some of the steps Kim Jong Un has taken to mitigate climate change impacts in the country, include joining international agreements on climate change such as the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement.
- Kim has also tasked officials with implementing disaster and environmental control measures.
- Analysts say climate change and environmental degradation in the country may provide an opportunity on common areas where the international community can engage with Pyongyang to assist.
- A challenge for North Korea is that climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts are unlikely to be successful without significant international assistance.

KEY POINTS

- Analysts say there are several reasons Pyongyang would support climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts. These include reducing the effects of natural disasters, lessen the effects on critical infrastructure, including military installations, increase food security, and decrease reliance on international humanitarian aid. It could also serve to preserve regime stability and tamper any potential internal dissent and instability arising from food shortages. Additionally, the 1990s famine is likely still at the forefront of the nation's collective consciousness.
- North Korea is a party to several international agreements on climate change, including the aforementioned 1997 Kyoto Protocol, and 2016 Paris Agreement, as well as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer. (Aum & Stevenson-Yang, 2022)
- The prioritization of climate change action by Kim and the joining of international pacts on climate change, demonstrate a level of sincerity in combating climate change, analysts say. (Dill et al., 2021)
- However, some analysts note that this may also be a way for Pyongyang to deflect blame for decades of mismanagement to climate change as an excuse for poor agricultural yields.
- It is likely recent disasters (e.g., the typhoons in 2020, and the floods in 2021) have driven home the realization of climate-exacerbated natural disasters. By addressing climate change impacts now, Pyongyang may hope there will be less frequent and severe natural disaster consequences. (De Ferrer, 2021)
- Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in less aid workers and humanitarian aid, thus heightening food insecurity.
- Kim's call for action against climate change is very likely to ensure national action towards adaptation and mitigation efforts.



DPRK: A people in need. The few tractors one sees during the planting season in March are more than thirty years old. Photo: Vitor Serrano EU/ECHO.

Source: EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid, 2011, Flickr. <https://flic.kr/p/bkMTQ6> (CC BY-ND 2.0)

KEY POINTS (CONT.)

- Pyongyang's climate change mitigation efforts are a promising start but North Korea is unlikely to succeed on its own without significant international assistance, analysts say. (Dill et al., 2021)
- According to analysts, climate change and environmental issues are a way for the international community to engage with Pyongyang because North Korea realizes the critical problems arising from climate change and environmental degradation, in particular food security and preparing for and mitigating the effects of climate-exacerbated natural disasters. So, while the overall political situation remains tense, observers see ways for Seoul and the international community to engage Pyongyang through climate change and environmental issues. (Dill et al., 2021 & Aum & Stevenson-Yang, 2022)
- International engagement on these issues may serve to open the country up to allow more aid, aid workers, technical assistance and advisors into North Korea. It also allows for increased monitoring of the humanitarian situation, preparation and response to natural disasters, and climate change adaptation and mitigation support from the international community.
- At a politburo meeting of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea in Sep 2021 Kim said that protecting against the effects of climate change was "more important than anything else." (Maresca, 2021)
- Kim has tasked officials with tackling droughts and floods and implementing crisis control measures such as "river improvement, afforestation for erosion control, dike maintenance and tide embankment projects" and to improve food supply issues. (Maresca, 2021 & BBC, 2021)
- Pyongyang has indicated that it is open to international assistance on climate change issues. A report by Dill et al., says that the United Nations Green Climate Fund approved a project to be implemented through the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) with the North Korean Ministry of Land and Environment Protection to develop training and capacity building exercises. "While success is not guaranteed, this type of support could also increase transparency with North Korea more generally while providing valuable support to North Korea as well," the report states. (Dill et al., 2021)

SOURCES

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