

A Bumpy Road to Bright Goals: North Korea's Approach to Implementing the 2030 Agenda and Prospects for International Cooperation¹

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Abstract

One of the issues on the national agenda of low-income developing countries is the formulation of their own sustainable development strategies. The United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is an important benchmark and road map for achieving this goal. At the same time, local specifics have an impact on the approaches, methods, and possibilities for achieving the declared goals in each particular state.

This study analyzes the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda, official North Korean statements, and Russian and foreign academic and analytical publications in order to outline North Korea's approach to localizing the sustainable development goals (SDGs), identify problems arising in this process, and highlight prospects for international cooperation. Methods of comparative and content analysis were used in the research. It is maintained that, in search of its own strategy, the DPRK's leadership is trying to use international experience by integrating the SDGs into national development plans. North Korean specifics lie in reformulating global SDGs according to the national narrative of local-style socialism construction, the decisive role of the state in the development and implementation of actual plans, a formal approach to the implementation of some SDGs, and a focus on economic self-sufficiency as a guarantee of sustainable development.

Despite the need for external assistance to achieve the main national SDGs, at present, the possibilities for international cooperation with the DPRK are significantly limited. The implementation of joint initiatives or assistance projects requires both obtaining permission from the UN Security Council 1718 Sanctions Committee and opening the borders of North Korea, which have been closed due to the coronavirus pandemic. However, given the global scope of the tasks set out in the 2030 Agenda, it is highly likely that in the medium and long term the DPRK will resume international cooperation in key areas of sustainable development—agriculture, healthcare, access to clean drinking water and sanitation, and climate change, as well as energy and transport infrastructure modernization. The main partners in this cooperation could be international organizations and neighbouring Russia and China.

Keywords: DPRK, North Korea, 2030 Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals, self-reliance, sanctions, international cooperation

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Introduction

In 2015, the 70th session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The sustainable development goals (SDGs) contained in it are intended to become a guide for all states in developing their national policies and should contribute to international cooperation in combating the current global challenges [Larionova, Safonkina, 2018, p. 97]. In 2020, 47 states, including the Russian Federation, submitted their voluntary national reviews on the implementation of the SDGs.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereinafter referred to as the DPRK or North Korea) also supported the 2030 Agenda. North Korea seriously approached the issue of implementing the SDGs at the national level, despite difficult relations with the outside world after the UN Security Council (UNSC) imposed severe economic sanctions on the DPRK in 2016–17 in response to Pyongyang's nuclear and missile tests.² In June 2021, the country's government presented the DPRK Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda [Government of the DPRK, 2021], which provides an insight into how the North Koreans localized the SDGs and at what stage the country is on track to achieve national targets integrated with the SDGs.

The UN is one of the few international organizations of which the DPRK is a member. Interaction with the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP), UNICEF, and other organizations from the UN system can be considered a systemically important area of North Korea's international cooperation. For reasons of national security, the DPRK does not publish detailed statistics or detailed data on the country's socio-economic development plans. However, after Kim Jong-un came to power in late 2011, the trend toward greater openness to the outside world became obvious. This, in particular, is evidenced by the very fact of preparing (for the first time in the history of the country) a voluntary review on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its publication in the public domain. Kim Jong-un also systematized the long-term planning of the DPRK's socio-economic development. After 2015, it has been carried out within the framework of five-year cycles—the economic development strategy for 2016–20 and the economic plan for 2021–25. The young leader wants his country to develop and is ready to use international experience for this purpose. In this regard, the UN appears to be a natural partner for receiving methodological, advisory, and practical assistance.

The topic of implementing the SDGs in North Korea is closely related to the analysis of the domestic socio-economic situation. Its various aspects have been studied in the Russian literature (see for example, G.D. Toloraya [2015], A.V. Torkunov, G.D. Toloraya, and I.V. Dyachkov [2021], S.S. Suslina [2015, 2018] and L.V. Zakharova [2017]) and by foreign researchers (see, for example, W.B. Brown [2018], J.H. Hong [2018], R. Frank [2019], B.-Y. Kim [2022], V. Koen and J. Beom [2020]; S. Lee [2021], H. Smith [2015], D. von Hippel and P. Hayes [2021], and M.-S. Yang [2021]), as well as in analytical reports of international organizations [FAO-WFP, 2013, 2019; Panel of Experts, 2022; UNOCHA, 2020]. A number of publications have been devoted to the impact of international sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic on North Korea (see, for example, G.B. Bulychev and I.A. Korgun [2019], J.Y. Choi [2020], S. Haggard and M. Noland [2017], H. Smith [2020], and A.V. Vorontsov [2020]). Several works on the analysis of North Korea's progress toward sustainable development have been published in the Republic of Korea [Choi, Hong, 2021; Sung, Jung, Jin, 2022].

This study analyzes the Voluntary National Review of the DPRK on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda (hereinafter referred to as the VNR), official North Korean statements, and Russian and foreign scientific and analytical materials in order to study the country's approach

² For a more detailed overview of the UNSC sanctions, see L. Zakharova [2019].

to localizing the SDGs, identify problems arising in this process, and locate opportunities for international cooperation. Despite the fact that the country is closed at the moment,³ official documents of the DPRK government indicate the existence of areas in which North Korea is ready to cooperate and even needs to. The study uses methods of comparative and content analysis.

The research results may be of interest from both theoretical and practical perspectives. From a theoretical perspective, the analysis contributes to the accumulation of knowledge about approaches to the implementation of the SDGs in low-income developing countries using the example of the DPRK. From a practical point of view, understanding the problems that North Korea encounters in the implementation of the SDGs is important when building Russia's relations with this neighbouring country, especially in providing development assistance to the DPRK. North Korea is one of the main recipients of Russian foreign aid [Zaytsev, 2020, pp. 68–9].

The study consists of the two main parts. The first outlines the DPRK's approach to the SDGs' localization and highlights its main specific features and problems based on the analysis of the VNR, official statements, and scientific publications. The second part is devoted to the importance and prospects of international cooperation for the advancement of North Korea's national sustainable development agenda. Based on the reports of international organizations and Russian and foreign scientific publications, the most critical problems for the implementation of the SDGs in North Korea are identified.

North Korean Approach to the Implementation of the SDGs at the National Level

The DPRK views the 2030 Agenda as conforming to the national development policy for building a powerful socialist country. To implement the SDGs, the North Korean government set up the National Task Force for Sustainable Development headed by the vice premier and chair of the State Planning Commission, and formed the Technical Committee responsible for collecting and evaluating statistical indicators. Localizing the goals of the 2030 Agenda, the government of the DPRK took the path of formulating each of the SDGs according to the national specifics (see Table 1), choosing the corresponding tasks and indicators, and linking them to specific national development goals (NDGs). The VNR highlights four NDGs: to strengthen the people's government and display the people-first principle, to develop all sectors based on science and education, to build a self-supporting and knowledge-based economy, and to construct a fully developed socialist culture. The national North Korean sustainable development agenda includes 17 goals, 95 tasks, and 132 indicators (the 2030 Agenda contains 17 SDGs, 169 tasks, and 232 indicators), reflecting the priorities of the government. Fifty-three percent of the global SDG targets were selected as the national SDG indicators or were integrated with the NDGs [Government of the DPRK, 2021, p. 8], which created a structured system for monitoring progress for each of the goals. South Korean researchers note that in the VNR North Korea "strategically" reformulated the global SDGs in accordance with the systemic characteristics of its state, emphasizing the strengthening of socialism as a necessary basis for sustainable development [Choi, Hong, 2021, pp. 1, 6].

³ In response to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, North Korea imposed severe restrictions on contacts with the outside world, closing its borders from January 2020.

Table 1. Global SDGs and Their North Korean Equivalents

Global SDGs	DPRK's National SDGs
1. No poverty	1. Improving people's livelihood
2. Zero hunger	2. Sustainable development of agriculture, self-sufficiency of food
3. Good health and well-being	3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all
4. Quality education	4. Prepare all as intelligent workers
5. Gender equality	5. Consolidate gender equality and rights of all women and girls
6. Clean water and sanitation	6. Ensure sustainable use and management of water and sanitation
7. Affordable and clean energy	7. Ensure access to sustainable and modern energy for all
8. Decent work and economic growth	8. Establish self-reliant and knowledge-based economy, and ensure work for all
9. Industry, innovation, and infrastructure	9. Put the national economy on a Juche-oriented and scientific basis and modernize infrastructure
10. Reduced inequality	10. Enhance the position and role of all the masses as masters of state and society
11. Sustainable cities and communities	11. Ensure living conditions and environment for more affluent and civilized life
12. Responsible consumption and production	12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production
13. Climate action	13. Combat climate change and its impacts
14. Life below water	14. Conserve and sustainable use the coast, sea and marine resources
15. Life on land	15. Sustainable management of forests, reverse land degradation, maintenance of biodiversity
16. Peace, justice and strong institutions	16. Consolidation of the socialist system
17. Partnership for the goals	17. Development of friendly partnership

Source: Government of the DPRK [2021, pp. 8–11].

The VNR provides a comprehensive picture of the main challenges which the DPRK is facing at the current stage of its development, although it is saturated with elements of national ideology and propaganda. In particular, it mentions the Juche principle which means independence in all spheres but which is difficult to implement in North Korea's economic conditions. The report emphasizes the existence of a public supply and distribution system for all households, free compulsory 12-year universal education, and free medical services for all citizens. The fact that the volume and quality of goods and services provided by the state is often not sufficient fades into the background. The main achievement is the implementation of socialist principles and the strengthening of the independence of the North Korean economy.

At the same time, the DPRK's leadership cannot be accused of hushing up the existing problems as a whole complex of these are reflected in the VNR. The government pays more attention to the description of progress (or lack of it) on the SDGs in those areas that the DPRK considers to be top national priorities directly related to economic growth and the living standard of the population. These areas include energy, agriculture, WASH (water, sanitation,

hygiene), and the environment. Given the closed nature of the DPRK's statistics and the government's desire to focus on the progress made, only a few indicators of the global SDGs were chosen to monitor achievements at the national level. For example, a measuring indicator of improving people's livelihood (SDG-1) is "proportion of households living in shared dwelling" [Government of the DPRK, 2021, p. 13].

An analysis of the declared results, challenges, and future plans for each of the national SDGs makes it possible to identify the "more exemplary" and the "less exemplary" among them in terms of the progress achieved in 2015–20. Among the goals on which more tangible progress has been made are:

- SDG-1: the proportion of households living in shared dwelling decreased from 0.8% to 0.5% over 2015–19 due to the construction of housing deployed in different parts of the country and provided free of charge to the citizens, according to official data.
- SDG-4: goals for universal primary and secondary education have already been achieved (compulsory 12-year school education in the DPRK, free higher education), 100% literacy of the population aged 15 to 24, development of distance learning.
- SDG-15: a forest recovery campaign has been conducted as a mass movement since 2015, resulting in increasing the forest area by 1.7% annually between 2015 and 2020 and reducing the area of land affected by deforestation from 10.6% in 2010 to 5.5% in 2019.

For the "less successful" SDGs, some progress has been recorded, but their achievement faces a whole range of challenges. For example:

- SDG-2: despite increased food production, the goal of harvesting seven million tons of grain per year (the minimum level of self-sufficiency for the DPRK) was not achieved due to natural disasters, lack of agricultural materials, and the low level of mechanization.
- SDG-3: despite the universal free healthcare system for all citizens and some successes in reducing child and maternal mortality, serious challenges are posed by the lack of the capacity of health personnel, the low technical foundation of pharmaceutical and medical appliance plants, and by shortages of essential medicines, as well as the high level of tobacco use among persons aged 15 or over (46.1% in 2017).
- SDG-6: there has been slow progress in providing the entire population with clean drinking water and sanitation. In 2017, 60.9% of the population had access to clean drinking water (71.3% in urban and 44.5% in rural areas), 47.5% of the population had access to a safely managed sanitation facility (70.8% in urban and 11.4% in rural areas).
- SDG-7: according to the DPRK's official data, 99.7% of the population has access to the national power grid, but the needs of citizens for electricity are not met; electricity generation in the country is declining (largely under the influence of seasonal and climatic factors). The main sources of energy are hydropower and thermal power stations. The use of renewable energy is being promoted, but the share of the population using clean fuels and technologies remains low (less than 10.3% in 2017), and progress is slowing. Coal is mainly used for heating and cooking in the city, while firewood and agricultural waste are used in the countryside.
- SDG-9: Manufacturing value added as a proportion of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the DPRK was more than 38% in 2019. The government systematically increased spending on science and technology and the number of researchers has been growing (by 2.9% per million people annually), but the modernization of infrastructure remains a key challenge. The implementation of the tasks of modernizing roads and railways according to international standards is behind schedule.

The North Korean government sees the ongoing international sanctions on the DPRK (which practically led to the economic blockade of the country), natural disasters (droughts and floods that hit the country every year) and the protracted "world health crisis" as the main

obstacles to the DPRK's efforts to achieve the sustainable development and improve the people's livelihood [Government of the DPRK, 2021, p. 5]. The last challenge is a problem for the implementation of the SDGs on a global scale [Larionova, 2020, p. 164]. The need to reform the existing system of economic management in order to increase its efficiency is not raised in the VNR, although foreign researchers regularly write about this (for example, Brown [2018]).

Not all national SDGs of the DPRK have specific numerical indicators, although this is not unique to the North Korean approach. At the same time, the VNR recognizes the importance of further improving the statistical work in the country and applying international methodology for developing indicators and monitoring progress toward achieving the SDGs. Prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, representatives of the DPRK participated in UN-organized consultations on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The DPRK practices a formal approach to some SDGs, which is characterized by general formulations and an abundance of propaganda. This includes the goals related to human rights. For example, SDG-5 is considered generally achieved, as gender equality is enshrined in law, and psychological and physical violence in the country "is not a social issue" [Government of the DPRK, 2021, p. 24]. Some SDG-8 targets are considered achieved, as all citizens are legally provided with decent work, and youth unemployment and child labour in the DPRK "do not exist." Within the framework of SDG-16, the principle "everything for the people" is proclaimed to have been implemented and the absence of social problems such as bribery and violence against children is recorded because they are prohibited by law. At the same time, even in the official North Korean media there are calls for the fight against corruption and other malpractices (see, for example, KCNA [2021a]), which points to their ongoing presence in modern North Korean society. However, the leadership of the DPRK refuses to bring this topic up for international discussion, which is reflected in the closing of this topic in the VNR.

To sum up, at the present stage, the North Korean approach is characterized by embedding the global SDGs into the narrative of building "socialism of our style," emphasizing the decisive role of the state in the development and implementation of specific plans, a formal approach to the implementation of some SDGs (if it is enshrined in law, then it is guaranteed; if guaranteed, then it is considered achieved) and focus on maximum self-sufficiency of the economy as a guarantee of sustainable development. Priority areas for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the DPRK include solving long-term problems of socio-economic development, such as energy and food deficits. An important place is given to combating the consequences of climate change and preventing damage from natural disasters. In the context of continuing international sanctions and the ongoing "self-isolation" of North Korea, the country's leadership has to rely on internal potential and mobilization of the population. At the same time, despite the inclusion of the SDGs in the DPRK's national strategy to create an economy relying on its own natural resources, technologies, and human resources, the VNR recognizes the importance of cooperation with the international community in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, especially in key areas related to improving people's living conditions.

Significance and Prospects of International Cooperation for the DPRK in the Context of the SDGs' Implementation

The importance of international cooperation to implement the SDGs for North Korea is determined, first, by the low level of the country's economic development and its unstable growth dynamics [Sung, Jung, Jin, 2022, p. 36]. According to the UN, the DPRK is a developing country, with a per capita GDP in 2020 of \$618 [UNSC, n.d.] (slightly higher than Malawi, but lower than Chad and Rwanda). According to the VNR, the DPRK in 2015–19 grew by an aver-

age of 5.1% annually, but external estimates paint a different picture. In particular, according to the UN, North Korean GDP began to decline from 2018, and according to the Bank of Korea (Republic of Korea) it decreased by about 4% for the entire period of 2015–19 [Choi, Hong, 2021, p. 8].

Domestic resources for sustainable economic development of the country are limited. North Korea has no significant proven reserves of oil or natural gas, and therefore depends on imports of relevant raw materials and energy resources. Their acute shortage was one of the reasons for the sharp decline in industrial production in the 1990s, which led to the deindustrialization of the economy and a protracted economic crisis. Suslina noted that solving the energy problem is one of the main priorities of the DPRK's domestic policies [2015, p. 266]. At the same time, according to researchers from the American Nautilus Institute, in 2019, the production of electricity and coal, as well as oil imports, amounted to only about a third of the 1990 level, holding back the country's economic development [von Hippel, Hayes, 2021, p. ii].

The lack of fuel, fertilizers, and equipment, as well as the natural disasters that hit North Korea every year, do not allow for stable agricultural production. This century's record grain harvest in 2019 (6.65 million tons, according to North Korean data) is still 30% lower than the gross grain harvest in 1982 (9.5 million tons) [Trigubenko, 1985, p. 104]. Due to crop volatility, the authorities failed to meet the government's stated grain supply target of 573 grams per person per day. In January 2013, rations averaged 400g [FAO-WFP, 2013, p. 29]; in January 2018 they fell to 380 g and in January 2019 they were further reduced to 300 g per day per person. According to available estimates by the FAO and the WFP, based on the population surveys conducted by employees of international organizations, in the late 2010s about 40% of the DPRK's citizens (more than 10 million people) required food assistance [FAO-WFP, 2019, p. 4].

The transport infrastructure of the DPRK is underdeveloped and requires modernization due to both the difficult terrain (mountains prevail) and a lack of investment. Investments in transport equipment have remained at a low level since the 1990s, limiting the physical mobility of labour and goods and complicating interregional ties [Toloraya, Korgun, Gorbacheva, 2020, p. 14]. North Korea ships by rail more than 90% of its domestic freight at an average train speed of 30–50 km/h. Only 10% of highways are paved [Koen, Beom, 2020, p. 18]. According to external estimates, the restoration of infrastructure in North Korea could cost tens of billions of dollars and require foreign assistance [Brown, 2018, p. 6].

The North Korean authorities blame international sanctions for creating serious obstacles to the implementation of the SDGs in the country. However, the Panel of Experts of the 1718 Committee of the UN Security Council, assessing the situation in the DPRK in the early 2020s as “close to a humanitarian crisis,” also cited the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting border closures, natural disasters, and changes in domestic economic policy toward the greater use of administrative command methods as its causes. At the same time, experts recognize that the UNSC resolutions adopted in 2016–17 “contributed to limiting the ability of the country to legally acquire humanitarian necessities and medical commodities, and the degradation of social services including health care” [Panel of Experts, 2022, p. 80–1].

Researchers in Russia and abroad consider various aspects of the negative impact of sanctions on the socio-economic situation in the DPRK. H. Smith [2020, p. 184] drew attention to the sharp decline in the agricultural production of North Korea in 2018, considering it to be the result of the UN Security Council sanctions in the energy sphere. Bulychev and Korgun [2019, p. 69–70] emphasized the impossibility of developing medical care in the country due to the existing bans on the import of equipment, as well as a significant reduction in the volume of food supplies under international humanitarian aid programmes after the tightening of sanctions. Russian scientists also note the “radical reduction in livelihoods” which calls into question the possibility of survival for people employed in key sectors of the DPRK's economy

[Toloraya, Korgun, Gorbacheva, 2020, p. 17]. According to South Korean researchers, as a result of the sanctions, household income in North Korea had decreased by an average of 25% by 2020 [Kim, 2022, p. 1].

A reduction of the DPRK's exports by more than 90% in 2015–18 significantly limited the possibility of importing raw materials, spare parts, and materials due to a decrease in the inflow of foreign currency. The ban on the supply of industrial equipment to North Korea negatively affected domestic investment in production [Choi, 2020, p. 376] further aggravating the problem of fixed assets' modernization. Some experts also note the environmental consequences of the sanctions. The lack of energy resources leads to an increase in the need for firewood and deforestation, which negatively impacts progress on sustainable development goals in North Korea [Korgun, Zakharova, 2022, p. 25].

In early 2020, the DPRK government decided to “hermetically” close the country's borders and sharply reduce contacts with the outside world to prevent coronavirus from entering the country [Vorontsov, 2020, p. 30]. This became a new factor influencing the socio-economic situation. As a result, according to South Korean estimates, the DPRK's foreign trade decreased by another 80% over the year, the country's financial system was destabilized, and industrial enterprises and markets worked only intermittently [Lee, 2021, p. 16]. At the official level, in January 2021, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un admitted that the goals set by the leadership in the field of economic development for 2016–20 had not been achieved in almost all areas [KCNA, 2021b].

In general, the DPRK's progress in the SDGs for 2015–20 can be assessed as modest, and in most areas, as insufficient, including the areas of food and energy security. This is largely due to the simultaneous restructuring of the country's economy to function under the severe sanctions of the UN Security Council, the lack of internal resources for more ambitious work on the SDGs, the virtual lack of access to foreign sources of investment and technology, and the voluntary self-isolation of the country from external contacts starting in 2020. In the national plan of economic development for 2021–25, state investments are concentrated on the metallurgical and chemical industries with the aim of their full shift to domestic raw materials. Kim Jong-un proclaimed agriculture and light industry as another “front” for the application of nationwide efforts to provide the population with everyday goods. However, in the absence of external assistance, the results of these measures are unlikely to put the economy on the path of sustainable development. The DPRK has not yet exceeded the level of industrial and agricultural production of the 1980s, when it was more engaged in the system of international economic cooperation.

Given Pyongyang's selective approach, the opportunities for international cooperation with the DPRK on the 2030 Agenda are limited to specific areas, primarily related to improving the basic living conditions of the population and the environmental agenda. The VNR notes successful examples of obtaining external assistance in agriculture, healthcare and nutrition. In particular, in cooperation with the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the FAO, and other international organizations, as well as foreign NGOs, the DPRK implemented projects on seed improvement, reduction of post-harvest losses, and nutritional improvement for vulnerable groups of the population. With the support from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the incidence of malaria and tuberculosis has been significantly reduced [Government of the DPRK, 2021, p. 17, 19]. As promising areas for cooperation in the future, the DPRK government has identified the improvement of the educational environment, the expansion of access to clean drinking water, and waste disposal and recycling. The climate action is of particular relevance for Pyongyang at the present stage: according to internal estimates, by 2030, with external assistance, the DPRK

can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 50%, and without it, only by 15% [Government of the DPRK, 2021, p. 41].

Although North Koreans are willing to receive external assistance, especially through the channels of international organizations, their activities in the DPRK have encountered obstacles since the second half of the 2010s. The UNSC resolutions maintain that the implementation of international sanctions should not have adverse humanitarian consequences for the civilian population. For these purposes, there is a mechanism for obtaining exemptions from the sanctions regime from the Committee 1718 of the UNSC. However, according to a survey of international and non-governmental organizations that had previously provided assistance to the DPRK, sanctions have significantly hampered the organization of humanitarian supplies to the country, calling into question the very possibility of such assistance. A separate set of problems is associated with the absence of a banking channel for financing humanitarian work in North Korea [Panel of Experts, 2022, p. 83] making it impossible for some NGOs to return to the country even after it reopens its borders.

In the foreseeable future, the UN Security Council is unlikely to ease its sanctions against the DPRK, since such a scenario does not meet Washington's goals of causing maximum economic damage to a potential enemy, which North Korea is [Toloraya, Korgun, Gorbacheva, 2020, p. 10]. At the same time, a new political situation unfolding in the world in 2022 may also affect the external relations of North Korea. The DPRK openly supports China and Russia in their confrontation with the United States, and Beijing and Moscow for the first time vetoed a draft resolution on tougher sanctions against Pyongyang in the UN Security Council [Asmolov, 2022]. All this creates political conditions for expanding cooperation between Russia and China with the DPRK.

Economic exchanges between Russia and North Korea in 2021 were frozen because the DPRK closed its border. However, before that, the two countries pursued trade cooperation. The RF was an important supplier of oil products to the DPRK and provided humanitarian assistance to its Far Eastern neighbour. For example, in 2019, Russia donated \$4 million to the World Food Programme for food aid to North Korea and \$4.8 million for medical assistance through UNICEF. In 2020, the RF supplied 50,000 tons of wheat to the DPRK as bilateral assistance, half of which was sent to the regions previously affected by typhoons [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the RF, 2020]. Thus, Russia contributed to the improvement of nutrition and healthcare for the North Korean population, which is in full compliance with SDG-2 and SDG-3. Prior to the pandemic, the Khasan-Rajin joint transport and logistics project was an important direction of cooperation. Within its framework, Russian investors reconstructed and modernized the railway and port infrastructure in the northeast of the DPRK [Torkunov, Toloraya, Dyachkov, 2021, p. 360–1]. Further participation of Russian companies in the modernization of the North Korean transport network could help achieve more progress on SDG-9. Moreover, Pyongyang has long shown interest in cooperating on the reconstruction of local power plants built with the use of Soviet technologies. Such interaction in the energy sphere is in line with the implementation of SDG-7, and also corresponds to the directions of Russian development assistance to North Korea specified in the intergovernmental agreement on the settlement of the DPRK's debt to the Russian Federation ["Agreement," 2012]. At the present stage, however, the potential of bilateral cooperation, which could contribute to progress on the SDGs, significantly exceeds the level of its real implementation due to the difficulties in financing joint projects.

Cooperation with China, which in the 2010s became the republic's largest trading partner,⁴ has brought bigger practical results for the DPRK. The main forms of Beijing's assistance were

⁴ According to South Korean estimates, in 2021, China accounted for more than 95% of all North Korea's foreign trade (compared to 88% in 2020) [KOTRA, 2022].

energy exports, investments in infrastructure projects, food aid, training, and humanitarian supplies [Reilly, 2014, p. 1167]. By sending significant amounts of grain as well as fuel and fertilizers⁵ to the DPRK, China has contributed (and continues to contribute) to the implementation of SDG-2. Since the late 2000s, there has been an increase in Chinese investments in the port and border infrastructure of the DPRK (for example, the construction of a new bridge in the Dandong-Sinuiju area or paving the highway from the Chinese border to the port of Rajin) [Park, Kim, 2017, p. 82]. All these projects were closely linked to China's own economic interests, while simultaneously contributing to the modernization of the North Korean transport network (SDG-9). Such a model is typical of the modern Chinese approach to financing aid to low-income developing countries [Mikhnevich, 2020 p. 91]. Further cooperation in the border transport infrastructure could contribute to the implementation of SDG-9 at the regional level but would require exemptions from sanctions restrictions and the resumption of exchanges between the DPRK and the outside world.

To sum up, although North Korea needs external assistance to achieve its main national sustainable development goals, the country's opportunities for international cooperation are significantly limited. The implementation of joint initiatives or assistance projects requires obtaining both permission from the UN Security Council sanctions committee and consent to the import of goods from the North Korean government. However, given the inclusive nature of the SDGs and the global scale of the 2030 Agenda, the DPRK's international cooperation will likely resume in the medium and long term with the focus on the republic's priority areas of sustainable development—agriculture, healthcare, access to clean drinking water and sanitation, climate action, and energy and transport infrastructure modernization. The main partners in this could be both international humanitarian organizations and neighbouring Russia and China.

Conclusion

One of the issues on the national agenda for low-income developing countries is the formulation of their own sustainable development strategies. The 2030 Agenda is an important benchmark and roadmap for achieving this goal. At the same time, local specifics have an impact on the approaches, methods, and possibilities for achieving the declared goals in each state. In search of its own strategy, the DPRK's leadership is trying to use international experience by integrating the SDGs into national development plans and by using more than 50% of the indicators included in the 2030 Agenda to monitor progress. At the same time, the logic of the current developments in the world emphasizes the value of self-reliance as the most relevant sustainable development strategy for the North Korean leadership. However, there is also an understanding of the serious obstacles to the implementation of the SDGs at the national level without normal international cooperation, which is currently significantly limited for objective and subjective reasons.

As far as the external restrictions are concerned, at the end of 2019, China and Russia tried to start a discussion on a draft resolution that would partly ease the sanctions against the DPRK in the UN Security Council. In particular, the draft included easing restrictions on Pyongyang's exports of textiles and seafood (together accounting for about 50% of North Korean exports in 2017) and the supply of certain types of industrial equipment to the DPRK (all supplies were banned in 2017), as well as the possibility of hiring a North Korean labour force abroad, which

⁵ Beijing does not provide official data on the volume of assistance to North Korea. However, according to foreign estimates, grain supplies may range from 250,000 tons [Reilly, 2014, p. 1172] to 500,000 tons per year [The Asahi Shimbun, 2020].

was an important source of foreign exchange earnings before the ban came into effect at the end of 2019 [Haggard, Zhang, 2020]. Due to the opposition of western countries led by the United States, the initiative was not supported, and is unlikely to be supported in the foreseeable future.

As for internal restrictions, the VNR postulates the need to strengthen the anti-epidemic system to protect the lives of DPRK's citizens [Government of the DPRK, 2021, p. 21]. This means maintaining strict control and quarantine for all people entering the country, as well as quarantine and disinfection of all imports for the coming years. The first cases of coronavirus infection, officially recognized by the authorities in May 2022, did not change the country's strategy of "maximum closure."

As a result, at the present stage, international cooperation with the DPRK on the SDGs can only be carried out in compliance with all external sanctions and internal quarantine restrictions. Russia, which provided aid to neighbouring North Korea in the 2010s both bilaterally and through the channels of international organizations, in 2021 was no longer able to do so due to the closure of the DPRK's border. However, judging by the practice of resuming Chinese-North Korean trade after the launch of a special import disinfection centre in early 2022, the restoration of cargo traffic between Russia and the DPRK may also be possible if similar measures are taken. The revitalization of bilateral cooperation, to which the governments of both countries are committed [Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East, 2022], may include the development of a road map for the joint implementation of the SDGs. In this case, education, healthcare, and energy could be considered as priority areas as they are indicated as potential spheres for joint projects in the Agreement on the settlement of the DPRK's debt to Russia signed in 2012. In a broader context, it is possible to consider cooperation formats with the participation of third countries, primarily China.

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