



📞 202.464.1982 📍 1800 K Street NW

THE PENINSULA

2023 in Review: North Korea Slowly Begins to Reopen to the World

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Author: [Troy Stangarone](#)

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North Korea was the first country to severely restrict travel and trade across its borders when the pandemic began in 2020. While the rest of the world has since largely returned to normal, many of North Korea's COVID restrictions remained in place at the beginning of 2023. However, Pyongyang began to ease these constraints in 2023.

North Korea remained closed to travel and foreign delegations until July 2023 when Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chinese Politburo Member Li Hongzhong headed delegations to Pyongyang to mark the 70th anniversary of the Korean War armistice. Travel for North Korean citizens was not eased until the following month when Pyongyang began allowing North Koreans who had been forced to remain abroad since the pandemic began to return home. Though, they were still required to remain in quarantine for a week upon return. This was coupled with first commercial flights between Russia and China to North Korea since the pandemic began.

After the initial resumption of diplomatic engagement in July, Kim Jong-un pursued a deeper diplomatic opening with Russia. He traveled to Vladivostok in September and is believed to have reached an agreement with Vladimir Putin to supply artillery to Russia for its war in Ukraine in exchange for Russian assistance with advanced military technology, including help with North Korean satellite launches. This was followed by a visit from Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to North Korea and meetings with Russian officials about enhancing economic cooperation.

Despite the increased diplomatic engagement, travel to North Korea remains limited. Only in December did Pyongyang begin issuing visas to Chinese investors, traders, and technicians, while tourism remains on hold.

One area where North Korea did begin opening prior to 2023 was trade. North Korea opened to freight train traffic from China in September 2022. While there had been speculation that trade might also resume via cargo trucks, it was only in November that sightings indicated that trade via cargo trucks may be resuming. However, despite trade being largely limited to freight trains and cargo ships for much of the year, North Korean exports to China were \$267 million through the first 11 months of the year. This is more than North Korea exported to China in any year since the UN sanctions on North Korean trade were fully implemented in 2018.

While North Korea took steps to normalize travel and trade in 2023, some pandemic restrictions continue to remain in place despite the rest of the world having returned to normal.

*Troy Stangarone is Senior Director and Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute of America.
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