

Journal of Peace and Unification 16(2), pp.127-146.

ISSN: 2233-9671 © 2026 by Ewha Institute of Unification Studies

doi: <https://doi.org/10.31780/jpu.2026.16.2.127>

Selective Reopening at the China-DPRK Border: Trade Recovery and the New Yalu River Bridge

Kwangdeok Ahn

Research Fellow, Sungkyun Institute of China Studies,
Sungkyunkwan University,
Email: diplomatecoreen@gmail.com

Received on 17 April 2026. Reviewed on 12 May 2026. Accepted on 29 May 2026.

Abstract

By 2025, China-DPRK trade had largely recovered from the collapse caused by the COVID-19 border closure. The New Yalu River Bridge, however, remained a revealing exception: a completed cross-border corridor whose port-of-entry functions still lagged behind the trade rebound. This article uses that disjuncture to examine reopening after the COVID-19 border closure along the China-DPRK border. Drawing on Chinese customs statistics through April 2026, Liaoning trade data, Dandong municipal reports, trade-regime records, and Sentinel-2 imagery, it argues that reopening proceeded selectively. The recovery ran through sanctions-compatible commodities, processing-linked goods, and Liaoning-centered networks, while the bridge's "border contact surface" emerged more slowly on the DPRK side. The case suggests that recent China-DPRK recovery should be read less as a restoration of bilateral relations than as a managed reordering of flows, channels, and border spaces.

Keywords: China-DPRK Relations, Selective Reopening, New Yalu River Bridge, Dandong, Border Economy, Sanctions

I. Introduction

“Recovery” has become a convenient shorthand for describing China-DPRK relations after the COVID-19 border closure. The border, however, tells a less straightforward story. By 2025, bilateral trade had returned close to its pre-COVID-19 level, and Liaoning’s trade with the DPRK had rebounded sharply. Yet the New Yalu River Bridge—completed more than a decade earlier and long presented as a future artery between Dandong and Sinuiju—still had not become a route of full border normalization. Trade revived before the new bridge’s border contact surface was fully institutionalized. This unevenness defines the article’s central puzzle.

The bridge sits at the point where trade recovery, local development planning, customs administration, and North Korean border control meet. A rebound in aggregate trade alone can make the relationship look normalized. The continued non-operation of the bridge complicates that picture. It suggests that recovery after the COVID-19 border closure was organized through some channels before others, and that economic reconnection could proceed without the simultaneous normalization of every border route.

“Selective reopening” names this pattern: a border recovery in which flows return in a particular order and under particular conditions. Commodities that remain possible under sanctions, trade regimes that can be monitored administratively, and networks already embedded in Dandong and Liaoning recovered first. A newer contact surface, such as the New Yalu River Bridge port-of-entry (POE) complex, required a more demanding combination of customs, quarantine, vehicle movement, personnel movement, and surveillance arrangements.

The analysis therefore shifts attention from identifying a trade rebound to showing how that rebound was organized. The analysis shifts attention from aggregate trade and diplomatic atmospherics to the channels through which reconnection actually took place. It also treats the New Yalu River Bridge not as a failed construction project, but as a border contact surface whose delayed activation reveals the gap between moving goods and normalizing a new corridor. Finally, by reading trade statistics, local Chinese documents, and satellite imagery together, the article links the economic recovery of the border to the slower materialization of the space through which a new route would operate.

Capturing this sequence requires evidence that moves across trade, plan-

ning, and space. Chinese customs time series trace the contraction and recovery of trade from 2019 through April 2026. Product, trade-regime, and registrant-location records identify the commodities, channels, and regional networks that carried the recovery. Liaoning and Dandong documents clarify how the bridge port was folded into Chinese local planning. Sentinel-2 imagery adds the spatial record: the corridor existed, but the DPRK-side POE complex took longer to appear as a built contact surface.

The rest of the article follows the same movement from conditions to trade, from trade to the corridor, and finally to implications. Section II sets out the sanctions, border networks, and infrastructural conditions under which selective reopening took shape. Section III examines the recovery of China-DPRK trade and the trade regimes that carried it. Section IV turns to the New Yalu River Bridge corridor. Section V considers alternative explanations and draws out the implications for China-DPRK relations.

II. Conditions of Selective Reopening: Sanctions, Border Networks, and Border Contact Surfaces

When cross-border trade began to return after the COVID-19 border closure, it did so in a border economy already reshaped by sanctions, brokerage networks, and the unfinished institutional life of the New Yalu River Bridge. The border closure interrupted flows, but it did not erase those older structures. The goods that could move were already limited by the 2017 sanctions; the networks most capable of restarting exchange were still concentrated around Dandong and Liaoning; and the new bridge still required customs, quarantine, vehicle control, and personnel management before it could become a functioning border route. Reopening therefore began inside an inherited set of constraints and capacities.

North Korea's external economy is not shaped by domestic policy alone. Its development, marketization, and trade have long been entangled with colonial legacies, the Cold War, the rise of China, and the tightening of international sanctions (Gray and Lee 2021). The border after the COVID-19 border closure should be placed in that wider development-geopolitics nexus. What returned after 2022 was not an economy standing outside geopolitics, but a set of flows already conditioned by sanctions, Chinese local development projects, and Pyongyang's own concern with exposure and control.

Borders are not only lines of closure. They sort flows, allocate permission,

produce delay, and create hierarchies of access (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). States also apply different rules to different territories and populations, a pattern that Ong describes as “graduated sovereignty” (Ong 2000). The China-DPRK border after the COVID-19 border closure worked in this manner. Some forms of circulation became legible and manageable earlier than others, while the institutional space required for a new bridge corridor moved more slowly.

These conditions produced the sequence described here as “selective reopening.” With sanctions narrowing the field of possible trade and border networks keeping certain channels available, recovered flows moved first through goods and routes that were already legible. The New Yalu River Bridge followed a different path. It required a wider interface of logistics, inspection, and monitoring, and its contact surface moved more slowly than the trade that older channels could already carry. The result was a recovery that moved through commodities, channels, and spaces at different speeds rather than a single return of the border to its pre-COVID-19 state.

1. Sanctions and the Boundary of Possible Trade

Sanctions set the outer boundary of recovery after the COVID-19 border closure. From 2016 onward, UN Security Council resolutions and Chinese implementing notices progressively constrained North Korea’s major export channels and energy flows. Resolution 2371 restricted exports of coal, iron, iron ore, lead, lead ore, and seafood (UN Security Council 2017a). Resolution 2375 added textile restrictions and controls on condensates, liquefied natural gas, and refined petroleum products (UN Security Council 2017b). Resolution 2397 tightened the regime further by limiting crude oil and refined petroleum supplies and by addressing overseas labor revenues (UN Security Council 2017c).

Chinese implementing measures turned those resolutions into border-level commercial rules. A 2016 notice issued by the Ministry of Commerce and the General Administration of Customs restricted imports of North Korean coal, iron, and iron ore while preserving limited livelihood and Rason transit exceptions (MOFCOM and GACC 2016). A 2017 notice prohibited imports of North Korean coal, iron, iron ore, lead, lead ore, and aquatic products (MOFCOM and GACC 2017a). Another notice banned imports of North Korean textiles and imposed controls on exports of condensates, liquefied natural gas, and refined petroleum products (MOFCOM and GACC 2017b).

At the border, the effect of sanctions was not simply subtraction. Sanctions changed the composition of what could recover. Economic coercion places immediate material costs alongside expectations about future conflict, bargaining position, and reputation (Drezner 1999). In the China-DPRK case, the most visible consequence was a reordered trade field. Once coal, minerals, seafood, textiles, and petroleum flows were constrained, recovery moved toward necessities, intermediate inputs, processing-linked goods, and other items that remained outside the core prohibitions.

2. Border Networks and Governable Trade Regimes

Once sanctions had narrowed the field, trade still required organizations and relationships capable of moving goods. Dandong and Liaoning mattered for this reason as much as for geography. Firms in Dandong have accumulated long-term relations with North Korean counterparts and have often played brokerage roles, channeling North Korean information, personnel, and products to the outside world (Lee K. 2021). The corridor to Sinuiju and Pyongyang is therefore not only a route on a map. It is also a network of experience, access, and repeated transactions.

China-DPRK trade has long rested on uneven institutional foundations. Firms have often relied less on formal dispute-resolution mechanisms than on relational contracting and personal ties (Haggard and Noland 2012). Formal and informal practices have also helped traders manage personnel instability, policy reversals, sanctions enforcement, border delays, and smuggling crackdowns (Hastings and Wang 2018). These conditions made familiar and administratively legible trade channels especially important once the border began to move again.

Chinese actors did not operate under a perfectly coherent central strategy. Beijing has encouraged economic engagement with North Korea, but local governments and commercial firms pursue their own interests in investment, employment, logistics, and urban development. Reilly describes this as a principal-agent dilemma in China's economic engagement with the DPRK (Reilly 2014). Around Dandong, selective reopening was shaped by that mix of central policy, local planning, and firm-level networks.

3. Infrastructure and the Border Contact Surface

The New Yalu River Bridge enters this discussion because it marks a different kind of border operation. A working bridge would not merely move trucks. It would require a contact surface where vehicle traffic, customs clearance, quarantine, personnel movement, customs supervision, bonded logistics, and monitoring converge. Infrastructure is the material network through which goods, people, finance, and information circulate, shaping speed, direction, and vulnerability (Larkin 2013). Logistics corridors also combine economic circulation with border management, data collection, and surveillance (Cowen 2014).

The bridge had already been embedded for years in Dandong's plans for urban development, logistics reallocation around Langtou, and border trade with North Korea. From Liaoning and Dandong's perspective, it promised to relieve pressure on the older Sino-Korean Friendship Bridge and to connect the new urban district, port functions, and road networks more directly to cross-border trade. Yet full operation required the DPRK side to institutionalize its own part of the contact surface. That requirement made the bridge different from the existing routes through which goods could begin moving again.

This slower materialization of the DPRK-side contact surface became more visible after the COVID-19 border closure. Trade revived through older channels and governable trade regimes, while the POE and related facilities around the new bridge passed through a longer sequence of land preparation, site maintenance, and construction. By 2025, the contrast had become clear: trade had recovered, but the bridge corridor still required a fuller institutional and spatial alignment before it could function as a normalized route.

III. Trade Recovery and the Channels of Selective Reopening

The trade recovery after the COVID-19 border closure unfolded within these conditions. Sanctions narrowed the commodity field; Liaoning and Dandong provided the commercial networks through which exchange could resume; and administratively legible trade regimes became the principal channels of renewed circulation. Table 1 and Figure 1 trace the movement from the 2019 pre-COVID-19 baseline through 2020-2021 contraction, the partial recovery of 2022, and the rebound that followed through April 2026.

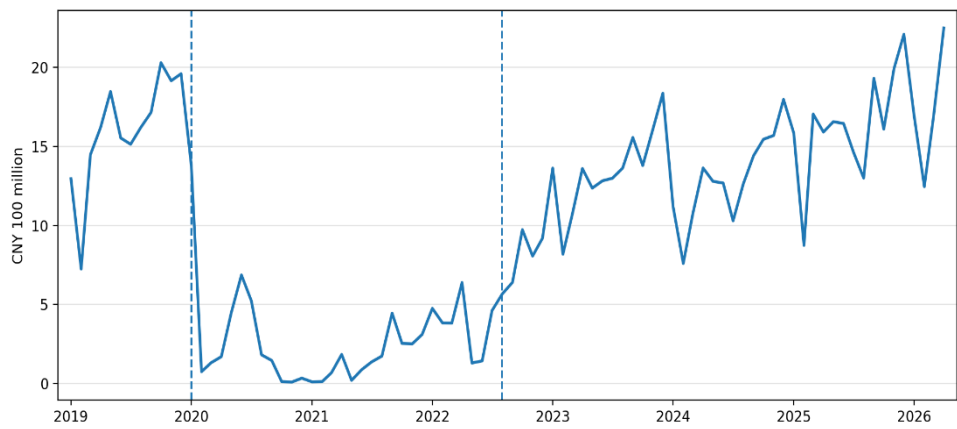


Figure 1. Monthly China-DPRK Total Trade, January 2019-April 2026
(Compiled by the author from China Customs data)

** Note: Vertical dashed lines mark January 2020 and August 2022.*

The monthly series in Figure 1 traces the recovery’s temporal shape. Trade fell sharply after the January 2020 border closure and remained at very low levels through 2021. Limited reopening appeared in 2022, followed by a more sustained rebound after 2023. By 2025, annual trade had surpassed the 2019 level in RMB terms, and the January-April 2026 figures show that the recovery continued into the following year.

Table 1. China-DPRK and Liaoning-DPRK Trade, 2019-2026 (Compiled by the author from national country-total tables, China Customs data, and Shenyang Customs data)

Year	China-DPRK Total Trade (RMB 100 million)	Annual Change(%)	Liaoning–DPRK Trade (RMB 100 million)	Notes
2019	192.5	-	60.5	Pre-COVID- 19 baseline
2020	37.9	-80.3	20.0	COVID-19 border closure
2021	19.4	-48.7	13.3	Prolonged closure
2022	65.1	+235.1	46.5	Limited recov- ery begins
2023	161.7	+148.3	83.4	Recovery accelerates
2024	155.1	-4.1	60.6	Adjustment phase

Year	China-DPRK Total Trade (RMB 100 million)	Annual Change(%)	Liaoning-DPRK Trade (RMB 100 million)	Notes
2025	195.6	+26.1	106.2	Exceeds 2019 baseline
2026 Jan-Apr*	68.8	+19.7	43.3	Early-2026 continuation

* Note: 2026 reports January-April cumulative values rather than full-year totals; the year-on-year comparison is against January-April 2025.

Annual figures reinforce the monthly pattern. Total trade fell from RMB 19.25 billion in 2019 to RMB 3.79 billion in 2020 and RMB 1.94 billion in 2021. It then rose to RMB 6.51 billion in 2022, RMB 16.17 billion in 2023, and RMB 19.56 billion in 2025. In dollar terms, a contemporaneous Reuters report, drawing on Chinese customs data, placed 2025 two-way trade at US\$2.73 billion, close to the US\$2.79 billion recorded in 2019 (Reuters 2026). Liaoning's trade with the DPRK followed the same pattern, rising from RMB 6.06 billion in 2024 to RMB 10.62 billion in 2025, and reaching RMB 4.33 billion in January-April 2026.

Beneath the rebound lay a more selective commodity pattern. The closure of 2020 and the low-trade year of 2021 sharply reduced official circulation, but from 2022 onward reconnection began to form around goods that remained available within the sanctions environment. Food, fertilizer, medicine, intermediate inputs, and processing-linked goods returned more readily than categories directly constrained by the 2016-2017 sanctions. This structure explains why trade could recover while still looking different from the pre-sanctions border economy.

This unevenness is also visible in market-price data. A 2024 price-based research suggests that North Korea's links to Chinese and global markets were disrupted during the COVID-19 period, but not uniformly across commodities or exchange-rate movements (Jung, Kim, and Kim 2024). Rice and exchange-rate linkages weakened more sharply, while gasoline and diesel retained stronger connections to outside prices. The border after the COVID-19 border closure thus reconnected through some goods and channels faster than others.

Hair and wig-related trade is the clearest example of processing-linked recovery. China Customs product-level import records from the DPRK show that wigs, hair products and artificial eyelashes (classified under HS 6704) accounted for 57.2 percent of China's imports from the DPRK in 2023, 54.1

percent in 2024, and 46.4 percent in 2025 (GACC 2023-2025; author’s calculations). This concentration is consistent with Hong’s analysis that wigs and artificial eyelashes had become North Korea’s largest export category to China in 2023 and with Reuters’ report that wigs and other hair products remained North Korea’s largest export category to China in 2025 (Hong 2024; Reuters 2026). The sector suggests a managed circuit of labor-intensive processing rather than a broad revival of all forms of border trade.

The geography of recovery was equally patterned. Liaoning remained the core border axis, while registrant networks in Jilin, Guangdong, and Shandong linked the border economy to wider Chinese processing and distribution systems. In January–April 2026, Liaoning’s trade with North Korea reached RMB 4.33 billion, or roughly 63 percent of national China-DPRK trade for the same period (Shenyang Customs 2026). The border economy therefore continued to depend on Liaoning and Dandong, even as recovered trade was tied into a broader Chinese geography of production and circulation.

Table 2. Changing Shares of Major Trade Regimes in China-DPRK Trade (Compiled by the author from China Customs data)*

Year (Coverage)	General Trade	Customs- Supervised Logistics	Outward Processing Trade	Small-Scale Border Trade	Other
2019 (Annual)	60.0	14.7	6.8	12.1	6.4
2020 (Annual)	50.0	30.2	3.6	9.1	7.2
2021 (Annual)	56.0	29.0	0.0	5.3	9.7
2022 (Annual)	59.3	26.7	3.1	7.6	3.2
2023 (Annual)	58.5	21.1	13.7	5.3	1.4
2024 (Annual)	69.4	5.0	18.0	5.7	1.8
2025 (Annual)	62.1	7.2	19.5	9.1	2.1
2026 (Jan-Apr)*	63.7	6.0	17.8	8.4	4.1

* *Note:* Values are percentages of total China-DPRK merchandise trade in each reporting period. The 2026 (Jan-Apr)* row reports January–April cumulative values rather than a full-year total. The “Other” column includes residual trade regimes not listed separately; totals may not equal 100 because of rounding.

The trade-regime data add another layer to this pattern. General trade remained the basic regime throughout the period, accounting for roughly three-fifths or more of China-DPRK merchandise trade in most years. Customs-

supervised logistics was especially important during the low-trade years of 2020 and 2021, while outward processing trade became more visible after 2023, matching the rise of processing-linked commodities such as hair and wig-related goods. Small-scale border trade persisted, but it did not drive the recovery. The channels that carried the rebound were therefore not simply border-proximate; they were also legible to the state and administratively manageable.

By the time China-DPRK trade returned to its pre-COVID-19 scale, the rebound had found carriers in sanctions-compatible goods, brokerage networks, processing linkages, and Liaoning-centered logistics. Economic reconnection could move through those channels before the New Yalu River Bridge became operational. The bridge corridor posed a different problem because it required not only trade flows, but the institutionalization of a new border contact surface.

IV. Asymmetric Readiness in the New Yalu River Bridge Corridor

To explain why the recovery of trade did not lead directly to the activation of the New Yalu River Bridge, the corridor is best understood by reading Chinese-side institutional planning alongside the visible sequence of DPRK-side material preparation. Chinese official documents trace how the bridge was incorporated into port administration, logistics, and external-opening plans; the satellite record captures when the facilities needed to make the corridor operational became visible on the DPRK side.

On the Chinese side, the institutional design had been articulated well before the post-COVID-19 recovery. In February 2010, China and the DPRK signed an agreement on the construction, joint management, and maintenance of the Yalu River boundary highway bridge (MFA PRC 2010). Liaoning's Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for high-level opening-up placed the activation of the bridge port of entry (kou'an, 口岸) and the functional adjustment of the existing China-DPRK Friendship Bridge within a broader platform of external opening (Liaoning Provincial Government 2022). Dandong's own Fourteenth Five-Year Plan likewise described the already completed bridge as a facility that could be opened when conditions permitted, while recasting Dandong as an outward-looking hub for Northeast Asia (Dandong Municipal Government 2021).

Dandong's development politics give those planning documents their local meaning. Existing research shows that the project first grew out of Dandong and Liaoning's development interests before being elevated into national-level diplomacy, while Chinese and North Korean development visions diverged from the start (Lee K. S. 2018). The Chinese plan emphasized Dandong New District and South Sinuiju; North Korean priorities were tied to its own Sinuiju and Daegye Island planning. The bridge's long non-use reflected that older asymmetry in expectations and operating arrangements. Even without traffic, it remained part of Dandong's economy of anticipation, translating North Korea's possible opening into land values, investment expectations, and administrative plans (Kim C. 2017).

This longer planning history matters for the post-COVID-19 record. Existing routes and trade regimes could carry goods once border restrictions eased. The new bridge, by contrast, required a port-of-entry system in which customs clearance, quarantine, vehicle movement, personnel movement, customs supervision, bonded logistics, and monitoring could meet at a new point of contact. The recovery of trade through older channels did not automatically produce that institutional alignment.



Figure 2. Selected Satellite Views of the New Yalu River Bridge Corridor and DPRK-side POE Site, 2019-2025 (Sentinel-2 imagery, compiled by the author)¹

¹ Satellite panels use Sentinel-2 L2A True Color imagery captured in Copernicus Browser for the monthly date ranges shown in the panels. True Color is rendered as an RGB composite of visible bands B04, B03, and B02.

Figure 2 places those two scales in the same frame. The upper row follows the wider Dandong-Langtou-New Yalu River Bridge corridor. Chinese-side urban blocks, roads, and access infrastructure appear relatively stable across the sequence. The lower row follows the DPRK-side POE, where changes accumulate more slowly at the landing area and associated facility site after 2020. The contrast is the point: one scale shows a long-prepared corridor, the other a contact surface taking shape over a longer period.

That spatial unevenness resonates with wider evidence that North Korea's COVID-19-era economy did not contract uniformly. Callegari's analysis of VIIRS nighttime light data for 2020-2022 finds relative increases around Pyongyang, the Chinese border, some mining districts, and areas linked to weapons development, alongside more negative trends as distance from Pyongyang increased (Callegari 2025). The bridge corridor is narrower in scope, but it points in the same direction. Border space did not reopen, or remain closed, as a single undifferentiated zone. Specific sites were maintained, prepared, or delayed according to their institutional and political significance.

On the Chinese side, administrative documents folded the bridge port back into Dandong's broader opening platform. The 2025 Dandong municipal government work report stated that the New Yalu River Bridge highway port had passed national acceptance (Dandong Municipal Government 2025). The 2026 report grouped the opening of the bridge port with a road-transport customs supervision site, a bonded logistics center (Type B), the restoration of Langtou cargo functions, small-scale border trade, and the processing of mutual-market trade products as part of Dandong's agenda for high-level opening-up (Dandong Municipal Government 2026). Preparation thus extended beyond the physical road and bridge to the administrative infrastructure of ports, logistics, supervision, processing, and trade.

On the DPRK side, the sequence was slower and more visible in the lower row of Figure 2. In 2019, large associated facilities were not yet clearly present. In 2020, earthworks, site formation, and subdivision appeared. In 2023, the prepared site remained in place without a fully developed complex. By 2025, a sizable building cluster had become clearly visible near the landing point of the bridge. This suggests that the material infrastructure for a future customs and immigration interface had advanced substantially, even though full corridor operation had not followed. The timing is important because China-DPRK trade had already entered a recovery path after 2023. Existing routes absorbed the rebound first; the contact surface required by the new bridge materialized later.

The two kinds of evidence therefore meet at the same point. The satellite panels capture the slow materialization of the DPRK-side POE, while Dandong documents show that the bridge port was being folded into Chinese administrative planning. The corridor combined an existing bridge, Chinese port administration, Dandong logistics planning, and a DPRK-side contact surface that emerged more slowly. Economic reconnection and border-contact normalization moved in the same general direction, but not at the same speed. The time lag at the bridge is the spatial expression of selective reopening.

V. Conclusion: Alternative Explanations and Implications

Four partial explanations remain relevant: supply constraints, unfinished operating rules, sanctions-driven commodity convergence, and the strategic effects of Russia-DPRK alignment after 2024. Each accounts for part of the case. Taken together, however, they are best read as conditions shaping selective reopening rather than as alternatives to it.

Table 3. Alternative Explanations and Observable Implications (Compiled by the author)

Explanation	Observable implication	Evidence in this article	Assessment
COVID-19-era supply constraints	Delayed DPRK-side construction	POE site prepared after 2020; large buildings visible by 2025	Important condition, but insufficient to explain Chinese-side administrative progress
Operational negotiations delayed	Long non-use after completion	Bridge completed before the COVID-19 border closure; Chinese opening agenda reappears in 2025-2026	Important background; recovery after the COVID-19 border closure gave the delay new meaning
Convergence on non-sanctioned goods	Recovery centered on less restricted items	Food, fertilizer, medicine, intermediate inputs, hair/wigs, tungsten	Strong mechanism; works together with state management and border networks
DPRK-Russia alignment	Changed strategic environment	Military, labor, and energy cooperation expanded; China remained the main trade partner	Strategic context, not a substitute for the China-DPRK corridor

Selective reopening	Commodities, channels, spaces, and contact surfaces restored unevenly	Trade recovery; general and outward processing trade; Liaoning centrality; Chinese port preparation; DPRK-side POE lag	Best captures the combined pattern
---------------------	---	--	------------------------------------

These counter-readings are useful precisely because they illuminate different parts of the same pattern. Supply and negotiation constraints account for the material delay of the bridge contact surface. Sanctions convergence explains why recovery clustered around particular goods. The Russia-DPRK alignment describes a new strategic environment rather than a replacement for the China-DPRK corridor. What remains distinctive is their combination: total trade recovered, processing-linked commodities rose, general and outward processing trade remained central, Liaoning and Dandong retained corridor significance, and the DPRK-side POE appeared later. Selective reopening captures the order in which these elements came together.

The case speaks most directly to China's conditional influence at the border. Through Dandong and Liaoning, China can sustain border platforms, prepare ports of entry, organize customs supervision, support bonded logistics, and embed the corridor in local opening-up strategies. The actual operation of the bridge still depends on North Korean preparation and control over the contact surface. China's economic centrality is enormous, but a border route becomes operational only when the administrative, logistical, and surveillance systems of both sides meet at the same point. The case therefore complicates accounts that treat Chinese infrastructure capacity as equivalent to border operational control.

That conditional influence fits the internal structure of China's economic engagement with North Korea. The central government can encourage local governments and firms to expand economic interaction, but local development interests and commercial calculations do not always align neatly with diplomatic objectives (Reilly 2014). The New Yalu River Bridge is best understood as a transborder infrastructure whose operation depends on the intersection of central policy, local development, firm networks, and North Korean contact-surface management.

For Pyongyang, the case points to the coexistence of dependence and control. North Korea needed the recovery of trade with China to restore flows of necessities, intermediate inputs, and foreign-currency-earning goods. At the same time, it approached the expansion of a new contact surface involving

people, vehicles, customs, quarantine, and surveillance more cautiously. The DPRK was the weaker economic actor, but dependence on China did not eliminate its ability to modulate the pace and scope of exposure at the border.

Sanctions point to a second implication. They did not cut off North Korea's external economy altogether; they changed the form of recovery. Financial and trade sanctions have long pushed parts of the border economy toward cash, barter, and evasive settlement practices (Lee and Gray 2017). After the COVID-19 border closure, recovery unfolded on this altered terrain. Processing-linked goods, necessities, intermediate inputs, and selected raw materials underscore that sanctions reshape not only how much trade occurs, but what kinds of trade return and through which channels.

North Korea's closer alignment with Russia after 2024 changed the strategic setting without displacing the China-DPRK corridor. The Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership committed the parties to deeper strategic and tactical cooperation and, in the event of war caused by armed invasion, to military and other assistance in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter (DPRK-Russia Treaty 2024). Economic cooperation linked to the Russia-Ukraine war has also widened Pyongyang's options in areas such as labor, energy, and military supply, while Russia's share of North Korea's total trade remains far too small to replace China (Kim K. 2025).

Beijing nonetheless continued to manage the relationship. In April 2026, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi's talks with DPRK Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui emphasized strategic communication, close exchanges and cooperation, and the consolidation of positive momentum in China-DPRK relations (MFA PRC 2026a). In Wang's meeting with Kim Jong Un, the Chinese side again stressed the implementation of the two leaders' common understandings, exchanges, and practical cooperation (MFA PRC 2026b). The language points less to an abrupt push for full normalization than to a continued effort to manage stability, diplomacy, and practical economic reconnection.

The New Yalu River Bridge crystallizes the broader argument. Its long non-use was not a COVID-19-era anomaly; it had accumulated through the mismatch among Dandong development politics, North Korean planning, and unfinished operating arrangements. Once trade recovered after 2023 and surpassed the 2019 level in 2025, that old non-operation acquired a new significance. Trade could revive through existing routes and governable regimes while the bridge contact surface remained on a slower timetable. Trade recovery and border-operation normalization were related, but they were not the same process.

Selective reopening, then, is more than partial normalization. It describes

how sanctions, border networks, infrastructure, and contact-surface management combine to restore some flows earlier and hold others back. The China-DPRK border after the COVID-19 border closure did recover, but it recovered as a managed reordering of commodities, channels, and spaces. The recovery took shape where three conditions overlapped: sanctions-compatible commodities, established Liaoning-Dandong channels, and border arrangements that could be monitored and controlled. The case therefore shows that China–DPRK recovery after the COVID-19 border closure was not a simple restoration of bilateral exchange, but a selective reordering of the commodities, channels, and border spaces through which exchange could resume.

References

- Callegari, B. (2025). Mapping COVID-19's economic impact in North Korea using nightlight satellite data. *Journal of Policy Studies*, 40(2), 61-85.
- China Railway 12306 (中国铁路12306). (2025). Guoji lieche [国际列车; International train]. <https://www.12306.cn/> Accessed April 16, 2026.
- Cowen, D. (2014). *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Dandong Municipal Government. (丹东市人民政府). (2021). Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the 2035 Vision of Dandong Municipality. [丹东市国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和2035年远景目标纲要].
- _____. (丹东市人民政府). (2025). 2025 Dandong Municipal Government Work Report [2025年丹东市政府工作报告].
- _____. (丹东市人民政府). (2026). 2026 Dandong Municipal Government Work Report [2026年丹东市政府工作报告].
- DPRK-Russia Treaty. (2024). Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation.
- Drezner, D. W. (1999). *The Sanctions Paradox: Economic Statecraft and International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Easterling, K. (2014). *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*. Verso.
- Gray, K., & Lee, J.-W. (2021). *North Korea and the Geopolitics of Development*. Cambridge University Press.
- Haggard, S., & Noland, M. (2012). *Networks, Trust, and Trade: The Microeconomics of China-North Korea Integration*. Peterson Institute for International Economics Working Paper 12-8.
- Hastings, J. V., & Wang, Y. (2018). Informal Trade along the China-North Korea Border. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 18(2), 181-203.

- Hong, J.-h. (2024). The Status and Implications of North Korea's Trade with China in 2023: Challenging Outlook for Trade Expansion. *KINU Online Series* CO 24-12.
- Jung, S., Kim, D., & Kim, K. (2024). Impact of COVID-19 and border closures on North Korean markets: A comparison with international prices. *Asia and the Global Economy*, 4(2), 1-7.
- Kim, C. (2017). Bridges of Ambition to North Korea: Economy of Anticipation and Materiality of Aspiration in Dandong, China. *Critical Sociology*, 45(1), 1-17.
- Kim, K. (2025). Economic Cooperation between North Korea and Russia since the Russia-Ukraine War. *Global NK Special Report* 3, 1-20. East Asia Institute.
- Larkin, B. (2013). The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42, 327-343.
- Lee, J.W., & Gray, K. (2017). Cause for optimism? Financial sanctions and the rise of the Sino-North Korean border economy. *Review of International Political Economy*, 24(3), 373-398.
- Lee, K. (2018). The Politics of Scale in Sino-North Korean Border Cities: Eighteen Years of Building the New Yalu River Bridge [북중 접경도시의 스케일의 정치: 신압록강대교 건설 18년을 중심으로]. *Korea and International Politics*, 34(4), 153-181.
- . (2021). The Role of the Border Region in Sino-North Korean Trading Networks: A Focus on Dandong, China. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*. 38(1), 59-74.
- Liaoning Provincial Government (辽宁省人民政府). (2022). The 14th Five-Year Plan for Higher-Level Opening-Up of Liaoning Province [辽宁省“十四五”对外开放高质量发展规划].
- Mezzadra, S., & Neilson, B. (2013). *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. Duke University Press.
- Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China and General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China (MOFCOM and GACC; 中华人民共和国商务部、中华人民共和国海关总署). (2016, April 5). Announcement No. 11 of 2016 on the list of

certain mineral products embargoed against the DPRK [商务部海关总署公告2016年第11号 关于对朝鲜禁运部分矿产品清单公告].

_____. (2017a, August 14). Announcement No. 40 of 2017 on implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 2371 [商务部海关总署公告2017年第40号 关于执行联合国安理会第2371号决议的公告].

_____. (2017b, September 22). Announcement No. 52 of 2017 on implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 2375 [商务部海关总署公告2017年第52号 商务部 海关总署关于执行联合国安理会2375号决议的公告].

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MFA PRC; 中华人民共和国外交部). (2010, February 25). China and the DPRK Sign an Agreement on the Yalu River Boundary Highway Bridge [中朝签署鸭绿江界河公路大桥有关协定].

_____. (2026a). Wang Yi Holds Talks with DPRK Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.

_____. (2026b). DPRK top leader Kim Jong Un meets Wang Yi [朝鲜最高领导人金正恩会见王毅].

Ong, A. (2000). Graduated Sovereignty in South-East Asia. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 17(4), 55-75.

Plümmer, F. (2022). *Rethinking Authority in China's Border Regime: Regulating the Irregular*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Reuters. (2026, January 20). China's 2025 trade with North Korea rebounds to pre-COVID levels. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinas-2025-trade-with-north-korea-rebounds-pre-covid-levels-2026-01-20/>. Accessed April 17, 2026.

Reilly, J. (2014). China's Economic Engagement in North Korea. *The China Quarterly*, 220, 915-935.

Shenyang Customs. (2026). Liaoning Province imports and exports by country and region, April 2026, RMB [2026年4月辽宁省进出口国家和地区RMB].

UN Security Council. (2017a). Resolution 2371, S/RES/2371.

_____. (2017b). Resolution 2375, S/RES/2375.

_____. (2017c). Resolution 2397, S/RES/2397.

UN Security Council 1718 Committee. (2026). Supply, sale or transfer of all refined petroleum products to the DPRK.