

## Online Series

2023. 04. 06. | CO 23-13

## Changes of Urban Space in Sinuiju and the Forecast of North Korea-China Relations in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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This study seeks to assess the current state of North Korea-China relations and anticipate the foreseeable future of the relationship by closely examining changes to city spaces in Sinuiju, North Korea's primary gateway city and the center of trade between North Korea and China. Specifically, three changes are examined. First, analysis will focus on the completed construction of the road that connects the South Sinuiju district to the New Yalu River bridge, which had been delayed since the latter was completed in 2014. Second, the study identifies signs of how the plan for the development of Sinuiju has shifted from a uni-polarized plan centered on the Sinuiju district to a multi-polarized plan that includes the South Sinuiju district as well, in sync with the completion of this connecting road. Third, the study assesses the possibility that Uiju airfield, which has been utilized as a cargo to receive goods and resources from China under the emergency quarantine situation, may be transformed back into a military airbase. Based on analysis of these three changes, the bottom-up geo-economic dynamism created by the Dandong-Sinuiju border region will highly likely to act as a catalyst that will further strengthen the alliance partnership in North Korea-China relations at the level of high politics.

Sinuiju, which borders Dandong in China, is North Korea's primary gateway city and accounts for a large majority (60~80%) of the entire trade volume between North

Korea and China. Given its special geographic characteristic as a gateway city, whether trains are operated between Dandong and Sinuiju has been viewed as a litmus test of whether border closures have been lifted amidst North Korea's comprehensive border closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though bilateral trade between North Korea and China started to dramatically increase last year, the trade volume between the two in 2022 remained at only 63.1% of that in 2019 right before the pandemic, according to a recent research report.<sup>1)</sup> As such, China's role in resolving North Korea's shortage of goods and resources is expected to have a significant impact on North Korea-China relations going forward.

This study seeks to explore the aspects of the current state of North Korea-China relations that are difficult to uncover through trade statistics alone and forecast the future of bilateral relations by investigating in detail recent changes to city spaces in Sinuiju — North Korea's primary gateway city and the center of trade between North Korea and China. Specifically, three changes are examined. First, analysis will focus on the completed construction of a road that connects the South Sinuiju district<sup>2)</sup> to the New Yalu River bridge which had been delayed since the latter was completed in 2014. Second, the study identifies signs of how the plan for the development of Sinuiju has shifted from a uni-polarized plan centered on the Sinuiju district to a multi-polarized plan that includes the South Sinuiju district as well, in sync with the completion of this connecting road. Third, the study assesses the possibility that Uiju airfield, which has been utilized as a cargo to receive goods and resources from China under the emergency quarantine situation, may be transformed back into a military airbase.

### Change 1: Completion of the Road Connected to the New Yalu River Bridge

Until its completion in 2014, China and North Korea had contrasting views on where

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1) Chang-ho Choi and Yoo-jung Choi, "Assessment of North Korea-China Trade in 2022: Further Economic Hardship and the Transition to With-COVID-19 (in Korean)," *KIEP World Economy Today*, Vol. 22, No. 6 (2023), p. 6.

2) The city of Sinuiju consists of Sinuiju district and South Sinuiju district, as seen in Figure 1.

the New Yalu River bridge should be constructed. North Korea had hoped to either renovate and expand the existing one-way Sino-Korean Friendship bridge into a two-way bridge, or construct a new bridge at a location close to the Sino-Korean Friendship bridge to develop the Sinuiju district. On the other hand, China preferred the current location of the New Yalu River bridge, which is 20km downstream from the Sino-Korean Friendship bridge, to construct a new city to the west of Dandong with an aim to develop a 'greater Dandong' area.

China's stance took into consideration not only the development of this new city but also the regional development of Liaoning province, one of China's most underdeveloped regions. In other words, China had hoped to lay the foundations for growth through the establishment of the Northeast Asia logistics network that not only connects Dandong and Pyongyang but also connects Seoul and Pusan. This would have been possible by utilizing the geographical advantages associated with how the Shenyang-Dalian highway passes through the center of the new city and connects with the New Yalu River bridge in a straight line.<sup>3)</sup> The policy principle regarding the Northeast Asia logistics network of Liaoning province was suggested to the Chinese central government in 2018 as a provincial-level plan for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

North Korea has previously seen its ambitious plan for the Sinuiju Special Administrative Region announced in 2002 fail after Yang bin, who had been appointed as the minister, was arrested by Chinese authorities. Given that the plan for the Sinuiju Special Administrative Region was originally focused on the development of the Sinuiju district where the Sino-Korean Friendship bridge lies, North Korea did not welcome China's proposal of connecting the New Yalu River bridge with the South Sinuiju district. But North Korea eventually came to accept China's proposal because further strengthening friendly relations between the two countries was prioritized at the time. The fact that North Korea did not follow up on the completion of the New Yalu River

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<sup>3)</sup> Kyungsoo Lee, "The Politics of Scale of a Sino-North Korean Border City: Focusing on the 18 Years' Construction of New Yalu River bridge (in Korean)," *Korea and World Politics*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2018), pp. 159~162.

bridge for more than five years, from when the bridge was completed in 2014 to the second half of 2019, right before the construction of a connecting road began, can be viewed as a sign of North Korea indirectly revealing its unhappiness with China's proposal.

<Figure 1> Satellite Image of Areas near Sinuiju



Source: Edited by the author using an image downloaded from Google Earth (Filming date: September 6, 2022 / accessed March 28, 2023)



But construction of a road (4.3km in length, 2 lanes in each direction) that is connected to the New Yalu River bridge began in the second half of 2019 after having been delayed (the red line in Figure 1 above depicts the newly constructed connecting road). Construction had continued throughout 2020 and 2021, and it appears that the road was completed during the second half of 2022. The reason why construction began in 2019, immediately before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, is assumed to be China's proposal made during Xi Jinping's visit to Pyongyang for summit talks in June 2019. However, the continued construction of the road even during the unexpected COVID-19 may have been motivated by different reasons and intentions than when construction first began.

First, under the emergency quarantine situation precipitated by COVID-19, it is possible that the North Korean government may have concluded that it would be difficult to effectively respond to the pandemic situation through the existing ways of receiving goods and resources through the 'old' Sino-Korean Friendship bridge. North Korea had transformed Uiju airfield, a military airbase located in the border region, into a cargo to receive goods and resources safely from China and in a spacious area. Even though the airfield is located in a border region neighboring a friendly country, transforming the airfield into a cargo after removing fighter jets that had been deployed there would have been a difficult decision for the North Korean regime given that it could have created a security vacuum.

If the construction of the connecting road had been completed in 2014 at the same time as the New Yalu River bridge, it would have been possible to quickly transport goods and resources via the New Yalu River bridge and establish a large loading area on the sparsely populated fields adjacent to the connecting road, as shown in Figure 1. If so, the option of transforming Uiju airfield into a cargo would not have been considered. Meanwhile, if the COVID-19 situation in North Korea had worsened significantly, contrary to how it has been contained today, North Korean officials might have suggested the need to secure additional spaces as loading areas that use faster modes of transportation and have short pathways, rather than rely on Uiju airfield which has farther pathways and must use slower trains. Therefore, it can be inferred that the connecting road may have been constructed to preemptively prepare for this potential

need from 2020 to 2022 when the emergency quarantine situation was at its peak.

Second, it is also possible that the direction of city development for Sinuiju may have changed. In other words, rather than stubbornly pursuing a uni-polarized development plan solely centered on the existing Sino-Korean Friendship bridge, North Korea may have considered a development plan that links the development of the South Sinuiju district as another axis of development. Discussion of this possibility is related to the second change described below.

### **Change 2: Signs of Development Centered on the Sinuiju District-South Sinuiju District City as Central Axis**

A news report of Kim Jong-un's visit to Sinuiju and field guidance of the general construction plan for the Sinuiju city in November 2018 was published on the front page of the *Rodong Sinmun* on November 16, 2018. According to the article, the essence of the general construction plan is stated as follows.

“With the statues of our great leaders (*authors note*: the blue circle in Figure 2) respectfully erected in the Sinuiju central plaza as the center, the city central axis that extends all the way to the South Sinuiju district will be carefully cultivated while high-rise residential buildings (*Salimjip*) as well as municipal and provincial public buildings shall be placed multi-dimensionally in the surrounding areas. (Kim Jong-un) also instructed that high-rise *Salimjips* and skyscrapers should be magnificently placed along the central axis of the city, the main city road, and riverside of the Amnok river in a sculptural and artistic manner with many parks placed within the residential areas so that Sinuiju is constructed as a city within a park.”<sup>4)</sup>

The news article included three pictures. Among these, the picture placed at the

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<sup>4)</sup> “Our dear leader Kim Jong-un conducts field guidance of the general construction plan for the city of Sinuiju (in Korean),” *Rodong Sinmun*, November 16, 2018.

center of the front page was an image of Kim Jong-un pointing at a model of the Sinuiju district that shares a border with China. This confirms the North Korean authorities' original stance emphasizing the development of the Sinuiju district in accordance with the 2002 plan for the Sinuiju Special Administrative Region. In the article noted above, the mention of constructing skyscrapers "along the riverside of the Amnok river" further demonstrates the desire to focus development on the Sinuiju district. Another point worth noting is how North Korea's initiative for the development of Sinuiju city has changed. Specifically, the noted direction of development includes consideration of the South Sinuiju district, an area that has received less policy attention so far. The remaining two pictures (Figure 2 is one of these two pictures) concentrated on the "city central axis" that connects the Sinuiju district and the South Sinuiju district.

<Figure 2> Kim Jong-un and High-ranking North Korean Officials in Front of a Model of the General Construction Plan of the City of Sinuiju



Source: Front page of the Rodong Sinmun, November 16, 2018 (published with permission from News 1)

When Figure 1 and Figure 2 are viewed together, the area between the Sinuiju district and the South Sinuiju district mostly consists of farming areas today, whereas the same area is densely filled with buildings on adjacent roads in the model. The model of the South Sinuiju district is also carefully detailed.<sup>5)</sup> This indicates that the uni-polarized development plan centered on the Sinuiju district connected to the Sino-Korean Friendship bridge has been changed to a more multi-polarized development plan that addresses the city area in a more multi-dimensional way by expanding it as far as the South Sinuiju district. This shift for development direction must have taken into account the impact of the New Yalu River bridge on the city space.<sup>6)</sup>

While it may be a little premature to conclude at this moment, changes to the economic space surrounding the road connecting the New Yalu River bridge were also observed. As can be seen in Figure 3 (and also at the B location in Figure 1), there was new construction of what appears to be a storage facility in what used to be a farming area near the road connected to the New Yalu River bridge while the road was being built (estimated to have been completed in the second half of 2020). Moreover, a new factory, such as the Sinuiju holed coal briquette factory was constructed near the South Sinuiju station close to the connecting road (opened in August 2020). The size of the Sinuiju measuring instruments factory, also located near South Sinuiju station was expanded almost twofold (construction occurred in 2016). The fact that Kim Jong-un visited the Sinuiju measuring instruments factory (2015)<sup>7)</sup> and the Sinuiju cosmetics factory

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<sup>5)</sup> Although the complete model does not appear in Figure 2, the complete model was confirmed through a news report broadcast on Korean Central Television.

<sup>6)</sup> North Korea announced the development plan for the Sinuiju International Economic Zone in 2016. The fact that the map of the plan clearly showed how the New Yalu River bridge was connected to the International Economic Zone indicates that North Korea's position on the New Yalu River bridge had turned positive. However, the South Sinuiju district still remained excluded from the development plan for the International Economic Zone.

<sup>7)</sup> *Rodong Sinmun* reported that during his visit to the Sinuiju measuring instruments factory, Kim Jong-un stated that "significant accomplishments have been made in the production of various instruments" and that he "valued highly" the performance of the factory ("Our dear leader Kim Jong-un conducts field guidance of the Sinuiju measuring instruments factory," *Rodong Sinmun*, September 4, 2015)(in Korean). This positive assessment likely had an impact on the decision to expand the size of the factory.



(2018) during his field guidance of Sinuiju city also demonstrates the growing importance of the South Sinuiju district.

<Figure 3> The Storage Facility Newly Constructed near the Road Connected to the New Amnok River Bridge (From Left to Right: Before and After Construction)



Source: Edited by the author using an image downloaded from Google Earth (Filming date: (From left to right) March 2, 2019, September 6, 2022 / accessed March 28, 2023)

<Figure 4> Construction of What Appears to be a Hotel on the Sinuiju District–South Sinuiju District City as Central Axis



Source: Edited by the author using an image downloaded from Google Earth (Filming date: (From left to right) December 31, 2018, March 17, 2021, December 28, 2022 / accessed March 28, 2023)

The reason that the North Korean regime has chosen to alter the direction of the development of the Sinuiju city is either that it realized the limitations of trying to enhance both trade and diplomatic relations with China through the Sino-Korean

Friendship bridge or due to the ‘trauma’ of the failed 2002 plan for the Sinuiju Special Administrative Region, given that the New Yalu River bridge had already been completed. Put differently, the change in direction is likely to have been influenced by the strategic calculation that adding the South Sinuiju district which is connected to the New Yalu River bridge as a new axis of development for the Sinuiju city would be effective for receiving substantive assistance from China. Kim Jong-un mentioned a hotel to be newly constructed among many others required of construction and stressed the need for the water supply system to meet “international standards”<sup>8)</sup> as he also stated that the city of Sinuiju must be “well cultivated to suit its status as a gateway city.” It can be inferred from those remarks that he must have considered the prospect of hosting Chinese tourists and attracting capital from China.

However, the timing of Kim Jong-un’s visit to Sinuiju was after the 1<sup>st</sup> U.S.–North Korea summit meeting (June 2018) and yet, before the 2<sup>nd</sup> summit (February 2019). At the time, the deterioration of U.S.–North Korea relations that would follow the failed 2<sup>nd</sup> summit would not have been anticipated. Instead, it is likely that North Korea had hoped that economic exchanges with China would become much livelier once the 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S.–North Korea summit brought some accomplishments such as the easing of sanctions on North Korea. Consequently, the failure of the 2<sup>nd</sup> summit resulted in the loss of momentum to pursue the general construction plan for the city of Sinuiju. During his visit, Kim Jong-un ordered that the general construction plan for the city of Sinuiju “needed to be revised more realistically and resubmitted in the next few months.”<sup>9)</sup> But the fact that there have been no reports at all about this revised plan as of April 2023 indicates that the promotion of the general construction plan for the city of Sinuiju has been difficult due to worsening foreign relations as well as the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

In contrast to the expectation that the promotion of the general construction plan for the city of Sinuiju would be difficult unless the border closures are fully lifted, a building

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8) “Our dear leader Kim Jong-un conducts field guidance of the general construction plan for the city of Sinuiju (in Korean),” Rodong Sinmun, November 16, 2018.

9) *Ibid.*

that is considered ‘the first step’ in the process of cultivating the city center axis as mentioned in the plan has recently been built. Foundation construction of the building highlighted by the red circle in Figure 2 (as well as the A location in Figure 1)<sup>10)</sup> began in December 2018 immediately after Kim Jong-un’s visit to Sinuiju, as seen in Figure 4. The building started to take shape beginning in 2021, and the approximately 12-story building that appears to be a hotel was completed in December 2022. By comparing satellite images in chronological order, the pace of construction in 2020 was slow (or was postponed entirely) when the COVID-19 pandemic began, but it appears to have quickened after 2021 as confidence in quarantine measures increased. It is possible that Chinese capital may have been invested given that the completed building is thought to be a hotel.<sup>11)</sup> Moreover, it may be interpreted as signs that preparations are underway to open the border to Chinese tourists as the post-COVID-19 phase draws near.

### Change 3: Transforming Cargo back to Military Airbase

In February 2021, one year after the border between North Korea and China had completely been closed, Uiju airfield, which had previously been a military airbase, had been transformed into a large cargo to receive quarantine-related goods and resources from China. At the time, news outlets reported that storage facilities had been constructed on the runway, the railway connected to the Sinuiju Youth train station had been extended to the airfield, and the IL-28 bombers that were parked on the runway had been redeployed to Sondok airbase and Changjin airport in South Hamgyeong Province. The military function of Uiju airfield had been removed, and the likelihood of the resumption of trade between North Korea and China was

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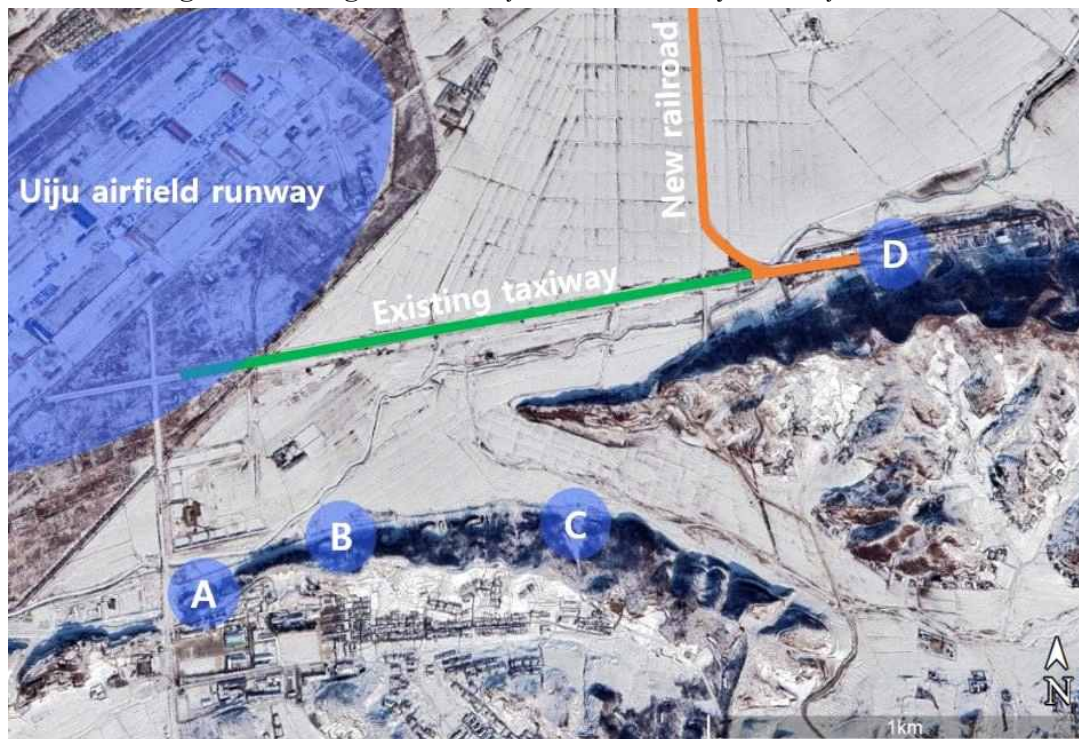
<sup>10)</sup> Although the resolution of the image in Figure 2 is low, the appearance of the building that was actually constructed closely resembles the building in the model, based on a comparison of different pictures.

<sup>11)</sup> The reasons why the building is considered to be a hotel are not only because the appearance of the building is similar to other hotels but also because a 2-story low-rise building (that usually houses halls, swimming pools, and other facilities) has been confirmed to be connected to the main building. This type of architecture is usually found in hotels. Of course, current changes are minimal, and further tracing of changes made at this location is required to more convincingly prove connections to China.



emphasized. Thereafter, news media occasionally reported estimates of trade between North Korea and China based on either the increase or decrease of goods and resources that were piled up on the runway that had turned into a loading area.

<Figure 5> Changes to the Uiju Airfield Runway and Adjacent Area



Source: Edited by the author using an image downloaded from Google Earth (Filming date: December 28, 2022 / accessed March 28, 2023)

It is necessary to assess the likelihood of Uiju airfield reverting back to a military airbase at this current moment, two years since it was transformed into a cargo. First of all, most of the fighter jets that were reported to have been redeployed to other airbases were confirmed to be found in areas not that far from the runway. In Figure 5, 20 MIG-21s were confirmed at locations A and B (12 jets at location A, 8 at location B), while a single IL-28 was discovered at location C. There is also an underground hangar in the mountains at location D in Figure 5 connected to the runway by a taxiway (the green line in Figure 5). Though news outlets that reported on the airfield's transformation into a cargo airport mentioned that most of the fighter jets had been



redeployed to other airbases, it was possible that many of the fighter jets may have remained in this underground hangar.

<Figure 6> The Entrance of the Underground Hangar Constructed in a Mountain



Source: Edited by the author using an image downloaded from Google Earth (Filming date: (from left to right) November 28, 2019, December 28, 2022 / accessed March 28, 2023)

But a new railway 2km long (the orange line in Figure 5) was also constructed at location D. The existence of the railway can be confirmed beginning in the fall of 2021. It is estimated that it may have played a partial role in the storage of goods and materials at the Uiju cargo airport considering that it is connected to the railway that runs through the Uiju airfield. Beginning in the winter of 2022, images confirm freight trains stopping at location D through the newly constructed railway while goods and resources are piled up there as well. In Figure 6, freight can be found piled up all the way to the entrance of the underground hangar (the right image in Figure 6) where the IL-28 had been parked until right before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (the left image in Figure 6). The fighter jets that had been confirmed at locations A and B appear to have been moved there from the underground hangar before the taxiway connected to the runway was blocked off due to the construction of the new railway.

Here, it is worth noting that the function of a military airbase that exists to protect a state's territory is not completely incompatible with the function of a cargo for bilateral trade. Stated differently, the positioning of a military airbase in the North Korea-China border region cannot simply be explained solely by geopolitical factors such as borders in conflict areas. The deployment of Chinese air force assets at

Dandong airport located 20km away from Uiju airfield might be intended as a response to the air power of the U.S. and South Korea, but it likely also reflects multiple considerations such as possible domestic contingencies in North Korea. Therefore, it is necessary to refrain from uni-dimensional interpretations that the transformation of Uiju cargo back to a military airbase is a sign of friction in North Korea-China relations.

### **Forecasting North Korea-China Relations in the Post-COVID-19 Era Viewed through Changes in Sinuiju**

Amidst the ongoing geopolitical volatility caused by the increasing competition between the U.S. and China, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the prospect of an extended deadlock between the U.S. and North Korea due to the latter's continued escalation of military tension, groupings by like-minded states such as "Russia-China-North Korea," "Russia-China," "Russia-North Korea," and "China-North Korea" are becoming more evident. Based on this dynamic, it can be projected that high politics that tends to emphasize traditional security issues will have a significant impact on relations between North Korea and China. But the influence of low politics must also not be overlooked when understanding the long-standing close relationship between Dandong and Sinuiju considering how the geographically interdependent nature of these two gateway cities cannot be explained through the diplomatic relationship between North Korea and China alone.

This study has confirmed how North Korea, which was not initially satisfied with China's construction of the New Yalu River bridge, has recently begun to positively view the role of the newly constructed bridge. Moreover, it also appears that China's participation and cooperation (either through tourism or capital investments) will increase in the restructuring of the new urban areas of Sinuiju. This bottom-up geo-economic dynamism is highly likely to act as a catalyst that will further strengthen the alliance partnership in North Korea-China relations at the level of high politics. If the "Russia-China-North Korea" grouping is solidified further in the future, it will be difficult to exclude the possibility of China changing its position on sanctions on

North Korea which it has previously cooperated with. Under this scenario, China will participate much more actively in the spatial changes that have occurred in Sinuiju, much more so than has been anticipated by this study.

Lastly, there is a need to raise awareness of the need to change the preconception that exists within South Korean society that inter-Korean relations will move further apart as North Korea-China relations become closer. As noted above, the construction of the New Yalu River bridge at its current location was made possible by the role played by not only the Chinese government but also the local government in Liaoning province. Even today, Liaoning province has requested the Chinese government for support for the establishment of the Northeast Asia logistics network. The geo-economic goal of Liaoning province may actually align with the interests of South Korea and its desire to alleviate geopolitical tensions on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea, which continues to increase military tensions daily, also has no reason to refuse the economic benefits that it may gain with China's establishment of the Northeast Asia logistics network. Now is the time for spatial imagination that can create new groupings (for example, "Liaoning province-South Korea"?) that can possibly disturb the "China-North Korea" grouping that currently appears to be solid. ©KINU 2023

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