

The Economic Autonomy Policy Line and Kim Jong Il's Diplomatic Diversification

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The North Korean media began reporting Kim Jong Il's Russian trip with unusual alacrity and openness on August 25th, just one day after the DPRK–Russia summit on the 24th. They promoted this trip heavily, even revealing images of the inside of Kim Jong Il's private train. This behavior is attracting scrutiny as it represents a break from the traditional practice of giving Kim Jong Il's safety top priority. To grasp the reasons behind this we must first understand the core principles of Juche ideology.

At the heart of Juche is the idea that "Only those who closely follow the Great Leader's guidance can become masters of the world." This is the "revolutionary idea of the Great Leader." However, the most representative element of the "Great Leader's guidance" is "autonomy." According to the Great Leader's "teachings," autonomy must be achieved in all areas of endeavor – ideological, political, diplomatic, economic, military, etc. Otherwise, the nation will become enslaved to the great powers or will be destroyed. Kim Jong Il, as the "next-generation Great Leader," has a duty to follow these instructions absolutely. The reason he was able to ascend to the position of Great Leader is because he adhered to the "revolutionary idea of

the Great Leader," which is the distilled essence of Juche ideology.

In the years since then, North Korea has strived to follow the Leader's instructions on autonomy strictly in every area, to the point of isolation. However, in the economic area, unable to achieve "economic independence," they have survived by relying on South Korea and China. The Great Leader's teachings say that economic dependence will disrupt political autonomy, and can ultimately lead to the destruction of the state. From Kim Jong Il's perspective this is like committing a "lese majeste" offense by failing to follow the Great Leader's teachings.

The degree of North Korea's reliance on China varies by sector, but it can be said to be 100% in fuel oil and about 90% in essential daily commodities. If China so desired, it could very effectively shut down the country at any time. At the 2000 inter-Korean summit, and again in 2009 at his meeting with Hyundai Asan Chairwoman Hyun Jung Eun, Kim Jong Il expressed the sentiment "I cannot trust China." This distrust is rooted in the fear that China might suddenly change course and use its economic card to suffocate the North. Kim Jong Il must have felt a responsibility to break out of this trap as quickly as possible; otherwise, Kim Il Sung's prophecy could very easily come true. During his rule Kim Il Sung practiced a diplomatic policy of keeping equal distance from both China and the Soviet Union to prevent either one from gaining coercive power over North Korea. As the most faithful follower of Kim Il Sung's teachings, Kim Jong Il could not help but choose the same path.

The DPRK-Russia summit held on August 24th was Kim Jong Il's attempt to reduce his dependence on China(as the *Washington Post* predicted in an August 21 article) and a strategic move to draw out South Korea. The Siberian gas pipeline project may also be intended as the economic achievement the regime needs to promote 2012 as the inaugural year of *kangsong daeguk* ("a strong and prosperous country"), projected to bring in some \$100 million in foreign exchange in future years, but it is ultimately aimed at drawing out Russia and South Korea in order to curb Chinese "hegemonism." Not only North Korea but the peninsula in general has seen a history of strife during periods of change in hegemonic control among the strong neighboring powers, resulting in great suffering for Koreans. Kim Jong Il sees China's rise as a threat to North Korea's security and particularly fears that North Korea might once again become a sacrificial lamb in the power struggle between China and the US.

Through this gas pipeline project, Russia has actively pursued a strategy aimed at its own benefits; North Korea has made use of this to bring the pipeline installation effort into the public eye. Of course it seems unlikely that this project will proceed smoothly from here on. Particularly uncertain is the question of whether South

Korean public opinion will support it or not. Many thorny issues remain, including obtaining a North Korean apology for the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents, guaranteeing the security of the gas line, settling fees and expenses, and distributing benefits.

However, the reason the North Korean media is making such hoopla about the results of the DPRK–Russia summit is to promote the message that the great Russian "polar bear" has finally ended its long hibernation and stepped forth to balance China's one-sided influence on North Korea, and the one who has patiently persevered in order to make that happen is none other than Kim Jong Il. This explains why the North Korean media has placed greater emphasis on the political than the economic aspects of the summit.

Paradoxically the greater China's influence grows the more North Korea will endeavor to diversify its diplomatic efforts, engaging with not only Russia but also South Korea, the US and Japan. We must skillfully take advantage of North Korea's actions, and to do so we must have the necessary strategic outlook prepared in advance. In particular we need to quickly develop a concrete strategy for building public consensus on the issue of importing Russian gas via North Korea.