

An Assessment of the Russia–DPRK Summit in Ulan–Ude and Russia’s Intention

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Chairman Kim Jong Il met with now–Prime Minister Vladimir Putin three times during Putin’s time as Russian president: in Pyongyang in 2000, in Moscow in 2001, and in Vladivostok in 2002. At the invitation of President Dmitri Medvedev, on August 24th Chairman Kim held a summit with the Russian leader at a military base in Ulan–Ude, the capital of the Buryat Autonomous Republic, in eastern Siberia near Lake Baikal. The following is an analysis of the Russian side’s intentions in holding this summit and an evaluation of the results.

Russia’s Intentions regarding this Summit

First, Russia is seeking to restore some of its influence over North Korea. Considering that the two countries share a border and the North’s socialist system was originally transplanted from the former Soviet Union, Russia regards North Korea as a country that belongs within its sphere of interest. However, in the years since the end of the Cold War, with the decline of Russia’s national power and the advancement of South Korea–Russia relations, Russia’s influence over North Korea has weakened considerably. Russia recognizes the need to restore its influence, particularly in light of the recent rise of China and the

increasingly tight China–DPRK relationship.

Second, in anticipation of the APEC summit scheduled to be held in Vladivostok in September of next year, Russia hopes to preemptively deter North Korea from making another provocation against the South. As Russia pursues the work of national modernization, one of the core tasks of its East Asia policy is incorporating its Far East region into the Asia Pacific economic sphere, which is rapidly emerging as a key hub of the world economy. Russia views the APEC summit in Vladivostok as the departure point for this plan and is pushing hard for its success. The continued stalemate in inter–Korean relations and the prospect of additional provocations against South Korea by the North could negatively impact the APEC summit. Russia hopes to avoid this through expanded economic cooperation with the North as well as food and energy aid.

Third, through a rapid return to the 6 Party Talks, Russia hopes to resolve three key tasks: normalizing the situation in Northeast Asia, denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula, and restoring inter–Korean dialogue. In accordance with the three–step plan for returning to the Talks, there were inter–Korean nuclear talks on July 22nd in Bali, Indonesia and US–DPRK talks on July 28~29 in New York. However, due to disagreements among the parties involved, the prospect of a return to the Talks remains unclear. Russia continues to view the Six Party Talks as important and hopes for their prompt resumption.

Fourth, Russia sees a chance to gain practical benefits through trilateral economic cooperation projects such as installing the Trans–Siberia and Trans–Korean rail lines as well as gas and electric lines connecting the two Koreas and Russia, while also helping to stabilize Northeast Asia and denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula.

Meanwhile, North Korea needs to secure Russia's support in order to ensure a stable transition to the third generation leadership under Kim Jong Eun and also obtain food aid and weaponry in preparation for its debut next year as a "strong and prosperous nation." It also appears that North Korea is seeking to readjust its policy orientation which has been leaning too sharply toward China, and to obtain practical benefits from both Russia and China in politics, economics and diplomacy.

Evaluation of the Summit

At this summit Chairman Kim and President Medvedev reportedly discussed returning to the Six Party Talks, expanding bilateral economic cooperation, and issues in ROK–DPRK–Russia economic cooperation. The following is an evaluation of the summit's results.

First, the traditional amicable relationship between the two countries was restored. Both sides had promised to strengthen cooperation in various areas through the 2000 North Korea–Russia Treaty on Friendship, Good–Neighborliness and Cooperation and the 3 summit meetings held in the 2000~2002 period. However they were unable to make tangible progress afterward due to their respective economic troubles and the North Korean nuclear issue, and thus the relationship cooled. This summit saw participation by many of the highest leaders of both countries, and it appears that they succeeded in restoring friendly relations through agreements on the political situation in the region and issues of mutual concern.

Second, Russia has declared support for North Korea's position on unconditionally restarting the Six Party Talks. In regard to this issue, South Korea and the US are pushing for concrete steps to demonstrate the North's sincerity, such as a moratorium on nuclear weapons testing and missile launches and inspection of the uranium enrichment facilities by IAEA specialists. Meanwhile North Korea is sticking to its position that the Six Party Talks should be reopened without preconditions. At this summit the North Korean and Russian leaders stated, "We agree that the Six Party Talks must be reopened unconditionally and without delay, and that the denuclearization of the entire Korean peninsula must be accelerated in accordance with the action–for–action principle of the 9.19 Joint Statement." Thus Russia demonstrated its concurrence with the basic position of the North Korean side.

Third, it appears that North Korea has elicited promises for various political, economic and military support from Russia. First of all it appears probable that North Korea obtained Russia's approval for the 3rd generation succession, as Russia views stability on the Korean peninsula as a matter of utmost importance. In the area of economics, they may have reached agreements on Russian fuel aid, investment in the Rason Economic and Trade Zone, the dispatch of more North Korean laborers to the Russian Far East, and the resolution of \$11 billion in North Korean debt to Russia. Also, considering that the defense ministers of both countries attended the talks, it appears likely that they reached an agreement on expanding high–level military exchanges and provision of weapons parts.

Fourth, there was a proposal for a special trilateral commission on construction of a gas line connecting South Korea, North Korea and Russia. After the summit President Medvedev told reporters, "We are optimistic about the prospects of reaching an agreement on constructing a natural gas pipeline passing through North Korea to South Korea." Specifically, they agreed to start a special trilateral commission to explore development of the project.

Fifth, North Korea is relaxing its policy inclination toward China. Isolated by the international community as a consequence of its nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009, North Korea has maintained an increasingly tight relationship with China. Through this summit North Korea seeks to prepare a foundation to allow it to escape from overly close dependency on China.

Points of Concern

Regarding resumption of the Six Party Talks, the North Korean media has reported that Russia agrees with North Korea's position of calling for "an unconditional return to the Six Party Talks." The South Korean government needs to get a more solid grasp of the Russian position on this issue. Furthermore, the proposal for a new gas line supplying 10 billion m³ of natural gas annually from Russia will unquestionably have real economic benefits for all three countries. But the costs of implementing it and the price of the gas to be supplied must be decided beforehand, and steps must be taken to ensure that North Korea will not be able to close off the line at some point in the future.