

Korean Breakthroughs Strengthen Land-Bridge

by Mary Burdman

Both nations on the Korean peninsula are moving with remarkable speed, to bring into being the initiatives begun at the historic Inter-Korean Summit of June 13-14. Ministers of both governments met in the Republic of Korea (R.O.K.) capital Seoul on July 29-31, and agreed not only to re-open the Liaison Office at the border village of Panmunjom, but also, more importantly, to rebuild the cross-border section of the north-south railway, which was severed during the 1950-53 Korean War.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (D.P.R.K.) delegation, led by Cabinet Counselor Jon Kum-jin, met with the R.O.K. delegation, headed by Unification Minister Park Jae-kyu. In a six-point statement issued at the end of the talks, the two sides said they were taking measures to fully implement the June 14 South-North Joint Declaration signed by R.O.K. President Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il, chairman of the D.P.R.K. National Defense Commission.

The July 31 statement said that the two sides will carry forward South-North ministerial talks, in accordance with the spirit of the Joint Declaration, and that the talks should "depart from the past habits of distrust and disputes to resolve easy issues first in the spirit of mutual confidence and cooperation."

R.O.K. President Kim Dae-jung met the D.P.R.K. delegation, to congratulate them on the success of the talks, and to reconfirm in principle the proposed visit of Kim Jong-il to Seoul.

The two sides also announced that they will hold the second round of South-North ministerial-level talks on Aug. 29-31 in Pyongyang, capital of the D.P.R.K.

The Korean Liaison Office at Panmunjom had been initiated in 1992, but was suspended by the North in 1996. It will be reopened on Aug. 15, the anniversary of Korea's liberation in 1945, from over a half-century as a colony of the Japanese empire. Its operations had been suspended since November 1996. At the same time, Koreans in the North, South, and overseas, will hold celebrations to commemorate the 55th anniversary of National Liberation Day.

On Aug. 1, the ruling Workers' Party of the D.P.R.K. issued new policy guidelines, calling upon all Koreans "to make 2000, the 55th anniversary of Korea's liberation, a year of new historic turn in the struggle for national reunification," and to "build the fatherland into a reunified and prosperous, powerful nation." The guidelines endorse "the implementation of the

historic North-South joint declaration," and appeal "to the whole nation to achieve the independent and peaceful reunification of the country at an early date by its concerted efforts."

Celebrations on Aug. 15 will include the exchange visits of 200 Koreans, half from each side of the border, who will be reunited with family members in both capitals. A North Korean symphony orchestra will hold a concert in Seoul to celebrate the visits.

On Aug. 5, a 44-member delegation from the R.O.K.'s largest industrial concern, the Hyundai Group, will arrive in the North to look for a construction site for a large-scale industrial complex it is planning to build. Then, during Aug. 5-12, the heads of leading R.O.K. news organizations will visit Pyongyang at the invitation of Kim Jong-il. On July 31, the two sides also announced that they will cooperate to ensure that Chongryun (the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan) members can visit their hometowns throughout the Korean peninsula.

The Iron 'Silk Road'

Of utmost importance, was the official confirmation in the July 31 statement, that the two countries "shall rehabilitate the Seoul-Shinuiju Railway and discuss the issue at an early date." This railroad, called the "silk road of iron" by both leaders at their summit, will be extremely beneficial, economically and politically, to both Koreas. Only some 20 kilometers of rail line need to be constructed. When completed, the rail line will travel through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), still the most heavily fortified border in the world, and bring great economic benefits to both sides, and to Northeast Asia as a whole.

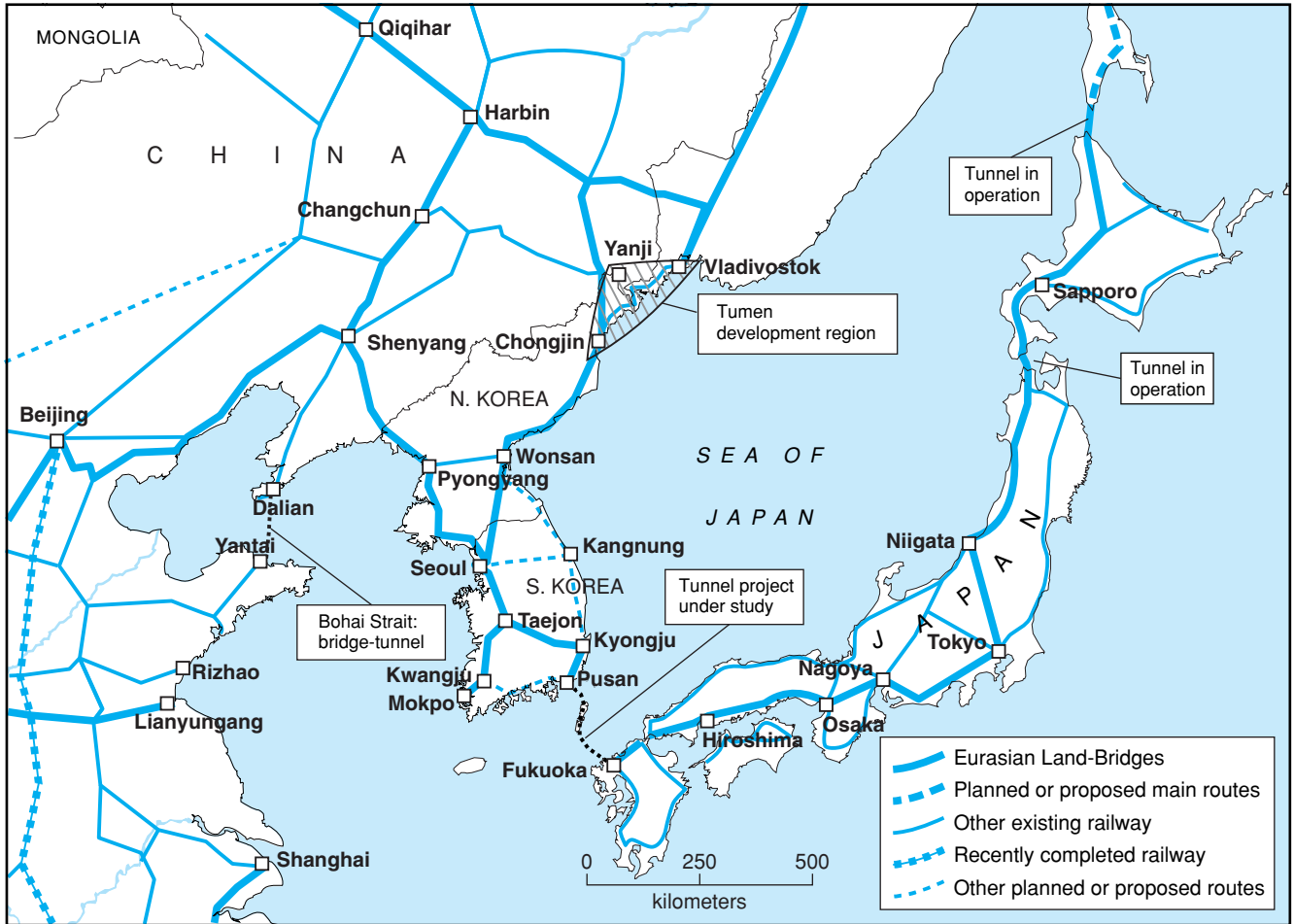
"The most important aspect of the railway is the symbolic effect," said Dr. Kim Myong-jin of the Korea Information Development Agency. "The railway would immediately improve trust between the two Koreas, and make progress in peaceful co-existence."

Officials at the R.O.K. Ministry of Transportation and Construction report that land and rail lines have already been bought for the project, and construction could begin as early as October. The 20 km of track between Munsan in the South, and Changdan and Pongdong-ni in the North, could be functional within three years, the official said. A construction schedule for the railroad, is expected to be completed during the second inter-Korean ministerial meeting.

Reconstructing the Seoul-Shinuiju railway "is going to be high on the agenda because its significance can greatly and quickly speed up efforts for unification," the *South China Morning Post* quoted a Transport Ministry official on Aug. 2. While reopening the Liaison Office at Panmunjom was the lead item on the two sides' six-point statement of July 31, a working rail line will ensure economic and political cooperation. "Plans for reconnecting the inter-Korean railway could place Seoul and Pyongyang on the fast track economically and politically, and compel the two countries to cooperate at an unprecedented level," the daily commented.

FIGURE 1

Pan-Korean High-Speed Rail Projects Proposed by EIR, 1996



The rail line will have far broader benefits. The direct link from Pusan, on the southern tip of the Korean peninsula directly across from Japan, via Seoul and Pyongyang to Shinuiju, will then be connected, via a functioning rail line, to the Chinese rail system, at the northern Chinese industrial city of Shenyang. The Chinese rail system is connected to that of Russia's Pacific coast province, and there is another rail link, directly from Pyongyang, to the Russian port of Vladivostok, the eastern terminus of the Trans-Siberian Railway. The Chinese rail system is already linked to that of Europe, via Kazakhstan and the Euro-Asian Continental Bridge. There are also reports, that an undersea rail link to Japan could be under consideration.

The economic potential for the integration and development of Eurasia, is enormous.

Estimates from Seoul already consider that the new rail link will cut current transport costs to Europe by 30%. Yet, the estimated cost of the project is only 144.5 billion won

(about \$140 million) for the South, and 94 billion won for the North, which includes upgrading the entire railroad north of the DMZ.

The rail line, which runs parallel to the western coast, will create the basis for new R.O.K. industrial developments in the North, which will be concentrated in the region on the Yellow Sea. The rail line will also dramatically cut shipping time between East Asia and Europe. The R.O.K. Ministry of Construction and Transport estimates that shipping time will be reduced from three weeks by sea, to one week by land. The D.P.R.K. could also benefit, by earning \$100 million a year in rail fees.

International Diplomacy

Korea has also become the focus of more and more Asian and Eurasian diplomacy. On July 19, Russian President Vladimir Putin became the first-ever Russian, or Soviet, head of state, to visit the D.P.R.K. Putin, who went to Pyongyang

after his first visit to Beijing, invited Kim Jong-il to visit Russia "at a convenient time." Putin got a very warm public welcome from big crowds on his way to and from the Pyongyang airport, and after their talks, Kim Jong-il altered his schedule to accompany Putin, when he placed a wreath on a monument honoring Soviet soldiers who fought on the D.P.R.K. side in the Korean War.

Putin acknowledged that relations between the two countries had flagged, but called their friendship pact, signed when Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov visited Pyongyang in February, a "positive step." In September 1991, then-Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze had announced that Moscow would open diplomatic relations with Seoul, and at the same time, demanded hard currency payments from Pyongyang for payments for oil and other vital supplies. This decision devastated the North Korean economy, which had depended upon Soviet oil, and lacked the hard currency to buy oil anywhere else.

Now, there is potential to reverse this situation. Ivanov has confirmed that Kim Jong-il has been invited to visit Russia's Far East region of Primorsky Krai on Sept. 1-4, as spokesmen for Gov. Yevgeni Nazdratenko in Vladivostok had announced.

Two weeks later, Li Peng, chairman of the standing committee of China's National People's Congress, will also visit.

Nazdratenko accompanied Putin to both China and the D.P.R.K. While Kim Jong-il's trip, his first to Russia, is being called "unofficial," it will be of real importance. Economic and trade cooperation are key issues up for discussion.

Spokesmen for Governor Nazdratenko have said that he has proposed several agricultural projects, and the use of Russian railroads for trade. He also called for better Russian-D.P.R.K. ties. "As a result of brainless politics, we literally abandoned this country, and we not only froze relations with it for ten years, but nearly created an enemy on our borders," he was quoted in the Russian newspaper *Konkurent*. "I am glad that there has been a breakthrough in relations with the D.P.R.K., and that Putin did it."

However, it is urgent to upgrade the Trans-Siberian Railway, which has been decimated by power cuts, lack of maintenance, and strikes by unpaid workers, due to the Russian economic collapse.

These initiatives, especially that toward China, are all the more interesting, in that Nazdratenko has been a severe critic of China, who had previously been disciplined by former Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov for creating unnecessary tensions with Beijing. China warmly welcomed Putin's visit to Pyongyang.

North Korea has also been made a full member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF), and D.P.R.K. Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun participated for the first time in the ARF meeting, which was held in Bangkok, Thailand, on July 27. The ARF includes not only the ASEAN nations, but also Asian, European, and American nations. The ARF Chairman's Statement welcomed the positive developments on the Korean peninsula. Paek Nam-sun met R.O.K. Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Yi Chong-pin in Bangkok, the first meeting of the two sides' foreign ministers in 50 years.

Paek Nam-sun met his Japanese counterpart, and they issued a joint statement saying that they have agreed to work to establish good neighborly relations and settle existing problems in their bilateral ties, and to start a new round of normalization talks in Tokyo on Aug. 21-26. Canada has also announced its formal recognition of the D.P.R.K.

Paek Nam-sun also met U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in Bangkok. Albright "welcomed" Pyongyang to join the International Monetary Fund, as the grounds for obtaining international economic "aid"—the last thing that the D.P.R.K. could possibly need.

Just as awful, is the "welcome" that U.S. Republican Party Presidential candidate George W. Bush has for Pyongyang. The Republican platform is written as if the Korean War had never ended, and as if current moves toward Korean reconciliation were not taking place. The platform attacks North Korea for being "outside the international system," and calls on Americans, vis-à-vis the Korean peninsula, to "honor the sacrifices of the past and remain prepared to resist aggression today."

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