

Why Did Chairman Kim Jong Il Visit China?

By

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North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's visit to China January 10-18, 2006 was very significant. The trip's primary purpose was to impress Kim Jong Il with the results of China's economic reforms. Kim's willingness to make the trip is additional evidence that he is refining, not reversing his economic reform program. The visit also demonstrated Kim's preference for China's economic reform model. There was some discussion of the Six Party Talks, but this was the visit's secondary purpose.

Kim Jong Il's tour by train to five major southern Chinese cities and high level consultations in Beijing indicate that the trip's planning had been underway for several weeks, possibly since Chinese leader Hu Chin Dao's visited Pyongyang last fall. Kim Jong Il toured institutes and industries in the areas of industry, agriculture, science and technology, and education. This was Kim's most extensive exposure to China's new economy since becoming North Korea's leader in 1994. The tour's extent equaled or surpassed his previous train tours of Russia.

In remarks at a banquet China's leadership hosted in Beijing, Kim confirmed that he had been highly impressed. He recalled his visit five years ago to Shanghai and stated, "The progress made in the southern part of China which has undergone a rapid change and the stirring reality of China, in particular, deeply impressed us," Pyongyang's official news service reported. Kim and his Chinese counterpart Hu Jin Dao concluded by reaffirming their nations' "fraternal friendship" and commitment to "consolidate and develop" their bilateral cooperation.

The tour highlighted Kim's determination to modernize North Korea's socialist economy. Many foreign observers, particularly in South Korea, had previously seized on North Korea's 2002 economic reforms as evidence that Kim Jong Il had opted for capitalism over socialism. Kim's recent remarks in Beijing clearly established his preference for China's socialist economic model over South Korea's capitalist system.

The visit also confirmed that Kim's determination to refine his economic reform program. Obviously some elements of North Korea's 2002 reform program created more problems than they solved. The shift in 2002 to markets and salaries sparked inflation soared and intensified corruption. Late in 2005, most markets were closed and the Public Distribution System of compensating workers with grain was restored.

Again, some foreign observers misread Kim's intentions. They claimed he was discarding his reform program. His China tour makes apparent that he is refining his reforms. His willingness to adjust policies according to their results points to impressive

pragmatism on his part. It indicates Kim Jong Il's willingness to listen to criticism. Equally important is his advisers' willingness to candidly critic his policies, at least regarding the economy.

Kim Jong Il's decision to refine his economic reforms was evident prior to his China tour. Late last summer the North Korean government informed foreign humanitarian organizations that it would phase out food aid in favor of "sustainable development" assistance. European and American non-governmental organizations and the World Food Program (WFP) were asked to adjust accordingly. When the Pyongyang government later asked the WFP and other food aid oriented groups like Caritas to withdraw from North Korea, their staff claimed that North Korea appeared to be reverting to isolation and ending its economic reforms.

Subsequent developments, including Kim's visit to China, strongly indicate that this is not the case. Since December 2005, all United Nations agencies active in North Korea, except the WFP, have been encouraged to continue and to expand their programs because they are consistent with Pyongyang's preference for sustainable development aid. International humanitarian groups with similar programs also have been encouraged to continue their efforts. The staff of UN and government affiliated aid agencies will continue to reside in Pyongyang. The staff of private aid agencies will not, but they can make frequent visits to North Korea to maintain their sustainable development projects.

The emphasis on sustainable is clearly designed to focus future foreign aid on improving North Korea's capacity to modernize and to internationalize its economy. For example, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) will remain as a window to international thought about economic reform and modernization. Private aid agencies will compliment UN; Chinese and South Korean government sponsored training programs aimed at equipping North Koreans in the languages, and management and technical skills vital for effective engagement in international commerce. Private U.S., European and Canadian aid groups will complement Chinese and South Korean government training programs in information technology, and English, the international language of commerce and the world wide web. Similarly, selected exchange programs in agriculture, medicine, technology, etc. will also continue.

As for North Korea's continuing need for food aid, the North Korean government will continue its emphasis on increasing domestic food production while the South Korean and Chinese governments will continue to provide food aid as circumstances require.

Kim Jong Il's China tour and Pyongyang's new preference for sustainable aid strongly suggest that North Korea's leadership recognizes that regime survival requires more than a nuclear deterrence capability. It requires economic reform which can succeed only if North Korea engages the international community diplomatically and commercially. This new consensus also suggests that Kim Jong Il has rallied sufficient ideological pragmatism within the Korean Workers Party and his bureaucracy to sustain and expand his program to modernize North Korea's economy.

Finally, Kim Jong Il's trip confirms that China-DPRK ties have not been adversely affected by the recent stalemate in the Six Party Talks. Kim Jong Il and Hu Jin Dao again reaffirmed their commitment to achieving a peaceful diplomatic resolution of the nuclear issue. Because of China's economic assistance and Kim's determination to modernize North Korea's economy, Pyongyang cannot afford diplomatically or economically to withdraw from the talks. Beijing surely is anxious for Pyongyang to rejoin the talks, but remains sensitive to North Korea's concerns. But the talks most likely will resume only when Pyongyang is convinced that it can do so without sacrificing its self esteem or making its economic modernization program vulnerable to the Bush Administration's economic pressure. The Six Party Talks, hopefully, might resume as early as March 2006.