

Kim Jong Il's visit to Russia

On 24 August the North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il met President Dmitri Medvedev in Ulan-Ude (Buryatia). The talks concerned trilateral infrastructure projects on the Korean peninsula (with South Korea's participation), and the resumption of the six-party talks on the Korean nuclear programme, which have been suspended since 2009. From Moscow's point of view, the principal objective of the dialogue with North Korea seems to be building up Russia's image as an active and independent actor in East Asia, especially in the context of China's growing importance.

Through its contacts with Russia, North Korea is trying to break its international isolation and gain economic assistance. For Moscow, better relations with Pyongyang are intended to strengthen its own position in the region (primarily in relation to China) and to promote its role as a valuable intermediary for the West in solving international crises.

However, the practical importance of these Russian-Korean contacts remains limited. Joint infrastructure projects – such as the construction of a trans-Korean pipeline, power lines and integrated railway systems – have been under discussion for nearly a decade. Lack of political determination on the part of Russia, and the unpredictability of the North Korean regime, have meant that the implementation of these projects is progressing very slowly, or not at all. Also, Russia's role in the six-party talks remains that of a bit-part player. <MaK>