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North Korea Situation Update

New Bridge, New Milestone in North Korea-Russia Relations

February 4, 2025

Understanding North Korea
Using the latest satellite imagery and AI Analysis

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New Milestone in North Korea-Russia Relations

Following the signing of a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty" between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin last June, and the subsequent deployment of North Korean special forces to Ukraine, the construction of a road bridge—in addition to the existing railway—as the sole land link between North Korea and Russia, has been observed.

This will strengthen economic cooperation between North Korea and Russia in the short term, and in the long term will enhance cooperation in various areas including social and military matters, while also serving as a means to circumvent international sanctions imposed on both countries. Furthermore, it is expected to decrease North Korea's dependence on China, increase its reliance on Russia, and ultimately shift the power balance in Northeast Asia.

* A "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" treaty was signed between North Korea and Russia in Pyongyang on June 19, 2024, stipulating that each country will provide military assistance to the other if one is subjected to armed attack. (KCNA / November 12, 2024)

Key facilities of border with Russia

Figure 1. The Key facilities of border with Russia

Going Beyond the Sole Rail Link...

Recent AI analysis of the North Korea-Russia border region has identified numerous pieces of construction equipment and vehicles. This suggests that new roads have been constructed in both North Korea and Russia, and preparations for bridge construction are underway.

* Last June, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty" in Pyongyang, which included an agreement to build a road bridge across the Tumen River. (Interfax / Feb 3, 25)

From the Rajin-Khasan project in 2007 to the North Korea-Russia summit in Vladivostok in 2019, North Korea consistently pressed for the opening of land routes, but without success. However, it appears that bridge construction is now progressing rapidly, likely as a quid pro quo for the deployment of North Korean special forces to Ukraine.

* The Rajin-Hasan project, launched in 2007, involved the renovation of North Korean and Russian railways to transport Russian resources, such as coal, to the Rajin port for export to South Korea or China. The project included the construction of a bridge between North Korea and Russia, but it was halted following North Korea's fourth nuclear test in 2016.

Initial work included removing the barbed wire fence along the border and clearing trees from the main path before constructing an unpaved road. Despite the winter season, the establishment of a construction zone on the Tumen River indicates that full-scale construction activity is now underway.

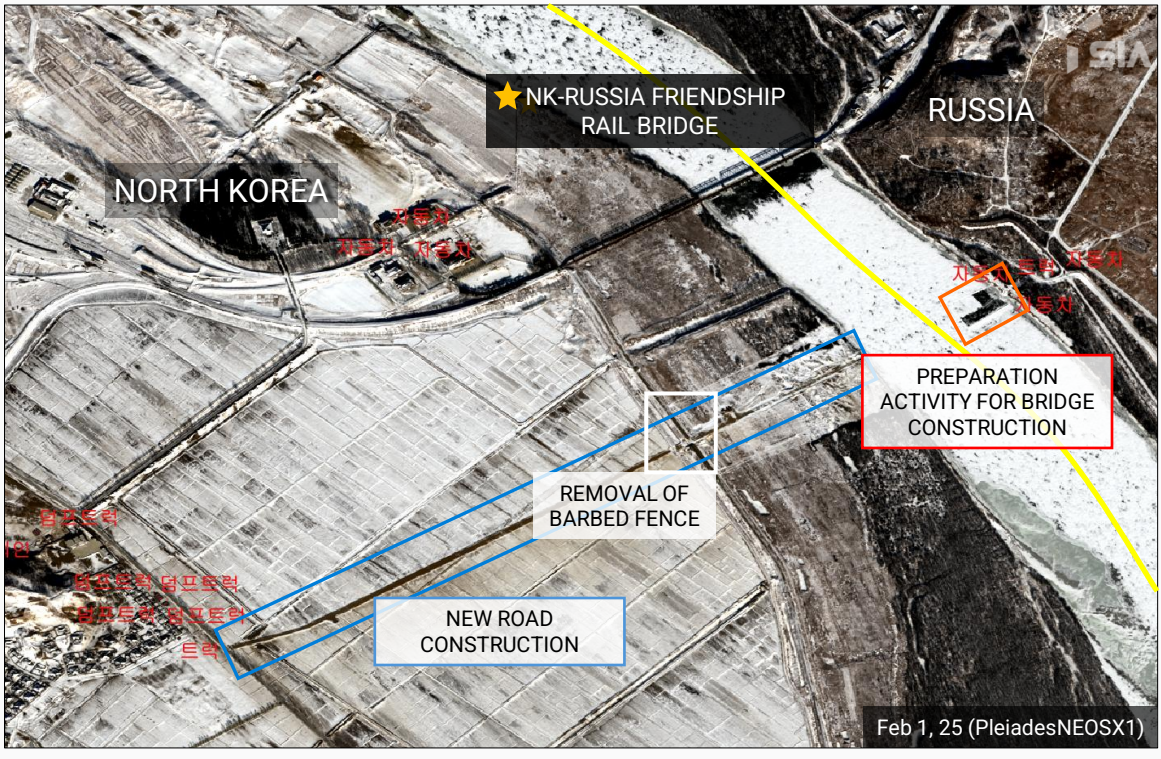

Figure 2. Russia's Inter-North Korea Bridge Construction

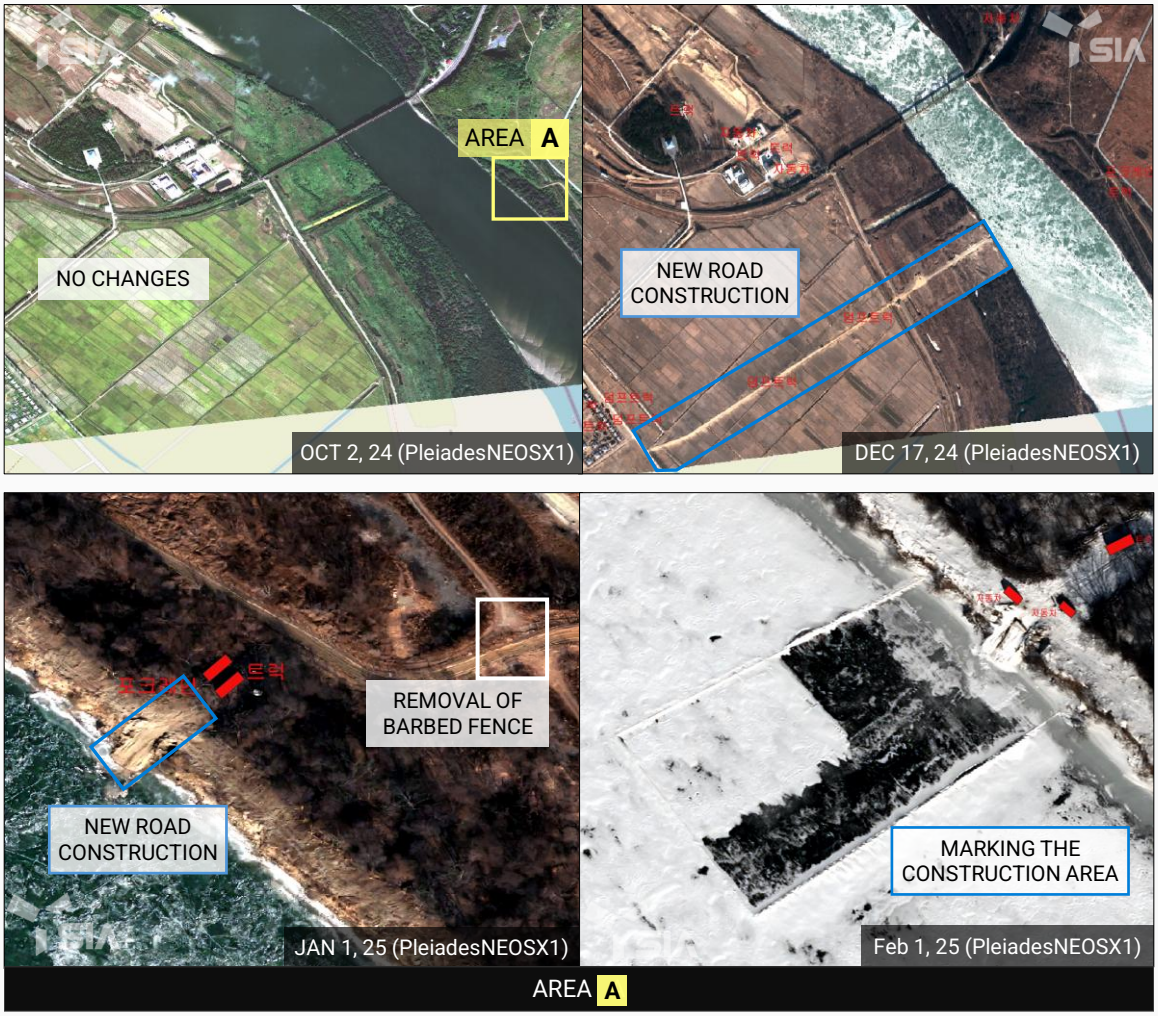

Figure 3. Preparation activities for bridge construction

Previously, the only land connection between North Korea and Russia was a railway. The construction of this bridge will significantly increase trade, strengthening economic cooperation and potentially offering a way to circumvent international sanctions imposed on both countries. For North Korea, it will facilitate the easy movement of personnel and materials, providing access to resources and technology. Russia will benefit from increased influence in Northeast Asia, a solution to labor shortages in Primorsky Krai and Siberia, as well as the potential to conduct international trade through the ice-free port of Rajin in North Korea. The overall effect is expected to be a reduction in North Korea's dependence on China, an increase in its reliance on Russia, and a shift in the power balance in Northeast Asia.

* The bridge to be constructed between North Korea and Russia will be 10 meters wide and 830 meters long. (RFA / FEB 21, 2024)

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70, Yuseong-daero 1689beon-gil, Yuseong-gu, Daejeon, Republic of Korea

+82-42-879-2300, www.SI-Analytics.ai