

Vice President of Strategic Intelligence Rodger Baker examines the situation around and the motives behind North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's visit to Russia this week.

NORTH Korean leader Kim Jong Il is visiting Russia. This comes at a time when North Korea is adjusting its diplomatic posture in preparation potentially for returning to the six-party talks, as the North Korean leadership is preparing for a more formalized transition of power and as North Korea prepares to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il Sung.

North Korea has actually had a very long relationship with Russia and for many years the North Korean relationship with Russia was even stronger than it is for China. Particularly post-Cold War, China became the major sponsor country of North Korea, as Russia's attention was focused much more to the West.

Russia has started to relook at the Far East, expanded its activities in the Far East, taken a greater interest in not only North Korea but in South Korea, in Vietnam and other areas. And the North Koreans are always looking for some way to, at least in part, reduce their economic dependence and thus their entire dependence on China. For them, China may be the country that keeps them stable and keeps them alive and protects them from the United States, but that comes at a cost and in many ways it comes at the cost of being subservient to the Chinese.

One of the interesting things that North Korea and Russia are going to be talking about on this trip is the idea of the gas pipeline that runs from Russia through North Korea to South Korea. This idea has been off and on the table for years.

There's obviously the concern from the South Koreans that if their natural gas comes through North Korea, then that would leave the North Koreans the ability to cut off gas supplies at critical moments.

But politically it helps to build up the North Korean economy, which is something that South Korea wants prior to reunification. The question of what would happen if the North Koreans cut off gas to the south, in part, is that they would lose money from the South but they would also come under increasing pressure from Russia, who has an interest in keeping the gas flowing to South Korea.

There's a sense of pressure in North Korea now as they head toward kind of an artificially-created date of 2012. They call it Juche 100. It's supposed to mark the 100th birthday of North Korean founder Kim Il Sung.

One of the elements in that is to try to find a way to strengthen the North Korean economic system, certainly not to change it entirely, but at least to create pockets of economic activity that can increase the amount of money that the country has.

Another element of that is removing the perpetual threat to North Korea, and that is to really push to try to find a way to end the Korean War, effectively, to have a peace accord with the United States and ultimately to have diplomatic relations with the United States.

If that can happen, from the North Korean's perspective, they will be able to convince more European and South Asian and other investors to come in and start to rebuild the North Korean economy and infrastructure.

We're not necessarily expecting any major breakthroughs out of this visit. Nonetheless, what we do see the North Koreans doing is opening up as many potential diplomatic fronts, as many potential options, as they can.

They're talking to the United States; they're talking with the Chinese; they're having different levels of negotiations with the South Koreans; they're talking to the Russians.

Ultimately, this is part of their strategy to perpetuate the regime. It gives them many options. They have a lot of different countries' interests that may be different and they can play those countries off of each other and that reduces some of the pressure on themselves.

It may not lead to significant changes in the way in which the North Koreans run their economy or the way in which they run their political system, but it can give them the space to continue on for a lot longer.