

NORTH KOREA'S ANTIQUATED RAIL FACILITIES AND WORSENING ECONOMIC MALAISE

The North Korean distribution system is built around its “iron road.” North Korean rails will also potentially play a large role in a future inter-Korean transportation network. However, the antiquated state of the North’s railway facilities serves as a major roadblock to its economic advancement.

North Korean rails carry 60 percent of its passenger traffic, and 90 percent of its freight. It would be difficult to find another transport network anywhere in the world that relies so heavily on the railroad. The majority of cargo shipments are made up of coal (32 percent), mineral ores (11.8 percent), construction materials (7.8 percent), metal (5.9 percent), lumber (5.8 percent), and grains (3.6 percent).

A heavily mountainous country, North Korea’s rail system is divided at the Nangrim mountain range into East and West networks. Since the 1970s, these two networks have been connected in two places: by the Pyongra Line and the Chungnyunichun Line. The rail network is made up of more than ten main lines, and more than ninety feeder lines. There are four primary routes: the ‘Pyongui Line’ (Pyongyang-Sinuiju), ‘Pyongbu Line’ (Pyongyang-Kaesong), ‘Pyongra Line’ (Pyongyang-Rajin), and the ‘Kangwon Line’ (Hamnamgowon-Kangwon Pyunggang).

Ninety-eight percent of the North’s rails are single-track. While most of its rail facilities are antiquated, investment in upkeep is lacking, and the capacity to operate has been diminishing since the 1980s. Following an agreement reached between the Committee for the Promotion of North Korean Economic Cooperation and the Chinese Yenbyen Allied Delegation, research released by the Chinese People’s Progressive Group found that the majority of North Korean rails suffered significant wear and tear

on the top and sides, most cross-ties were rotten, and concrete tunnel walls were on the verge of collapse.

The construction of new transportation facilities is necessary not just to reverse North Korea's economic decline; it needs to be prioritized in order to increase production and resolve famine issues. Continuing failure to invest in rail facility maintenance has experts fearing the ruin of the North's economy due to the growing inefficiency of the country's distribution network.

Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University
The Center for International Cooperation for North Korean Development
28-42 Samchung-dong, Chongro-ku, Seoul, 110-230, Korea
Tel: 82-2-3700-0780 Fax: 82-2-3700-0707
E-mail: icnk@kyungnam.ac.kr <http://ifes.kyungnam.ac.kr>