

# Lavrov Says N. Korean Leader Always Welcome

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North Korean soldiers inspecting a visiting Chinese naval frigate at the port of Wonsan over the weekend.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Il has a long-standing invitation to visit Russia, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters in Moscow on Wednesday during a joint briefing with his South Korean counterpart, Kim Sung-hwan.

"The timing and other organizational issues have to be coordinated by the nations," Lavrov said.

Media reported in late June that the armored train of Kim Jong Il — who never travels by plane — was spotted near the Russian border, apparently taking the North Korean leader to meet President Dmitry Medvedev in Vladivostok.

The meeting never took place, and Lavrov refused to comment on it Wednesday. Kommersant reported at the time that Kim Jong Il backed out on his plans after news about the meeting was leaked to the media.

Lavrov also said Monday that Russia was in talks with companies from North Korea and South Korea to build a natural gas pipeline to supply fuel to both countries.

"There are contacts at the level of gas companies' chiefs," he said, adding that no trilateral discussions have yet been held. "If experts agree at the corporate level, all three capitals will provide political support" for the planned project.

Russia may also build a power grid along the proposed pipeline route, Lavrov said.

Economic cooperation between Russia and South Korea is already blooming, with bilateral trade to reach a record \$20 billion this year, he added.

*(Bloomberg, MT)*

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