Tumen River: The Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI)

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*The Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI) (originally known as the Tumen River Area Development Programme - TRADP), is an intergovernmental cooperation mechanism in North-East Asia, supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), with a membership of four countries: People’s Republic of China, Republic of Korea, Mongolia and Russian Federation.*

(Greater Tumen Initiative, http://www.tumenprogram.org)

**Geography**

The Tumen River in North-East Asia forms part of the border between North Korea and Fareast Russia and between North Korea and northeast China. The river then rises in the Changbai Mountains and eventually discharges into the Sea of Japan/East Sea. The Tumen River’s source, Mount Baekdu, is located on the Chinese-North Korean border; Mount Baekdu is also the source of the Yalu River, which forms the southern border between China and North Korea. The Tumen River is the third longest river in Korea at 521 km. Only 17 km of the river forms the border between North Korea and Russia, while the other 504 km forms the border between North Korea and China. The main tributaries on the Chinese side are Gaya River and Hunchun River. The mean annual flow is 215$m^3$/s in the lower parts of the Tumen River. The drainage basin is about 33,168 km$^2$, of which seventy percent is located in China’s Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture. The Yanbian Prefecture is located in the Jilin province in northeastern China; one third of the population is Korean immigrants who migrated in the early part of the 19th century. Twenty-nine percent of the drainage basin is located in North Korea’s Hamgyong Province. One percent of the drainage basin is located in the Khasan wetlands in Primorsky Territory in Russia. Out of the 2.2 million people that live in the basin area, about 75% are from Yanbian Prefecture in China.
History

The Tumen River served as a refugee crossing for North Koreans into China in the 1990s because of widespread famine. It continues to serve that purpose today due in part to its geography: it is much narrower and shallower than the Yalu River and therefore, easier to cross. The Tumen River is heavily polluted mainly from industries in China and North Korea. About 75% of the industrial pollutants were from Chinese sources: mainly pulp and paper mills in Yanbian Prefecture. In North Korea, the industrial pollutants were discharged from an iron mine and paper mills in Hamgyong Province. Despite being heavily polluted, the Tumen River and the basin area were and continue to be a major tourist attraction.

Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI)

In the early 1990s, China showed interest in developing the Tumen region to boost the economy in the northeast region and to allow access to a port in the Sea of Japan. In 1995, the Tumen River Area Development Programme (TRADP) was formed with the objectives of regional cooperation, economic development, and environmental management. The TRADP was supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and consisted of five member countries: China, Russia, North Korea, South Korea, and Mongolia. The development project was a 20-year project estimated at $30 billion, which has since grown to $80 billion. Under the TRADP, the Rajin-Sonbong Economic Special Zone (Rason) was created on land leased from North Korea, Russia, and China as a free economic zone for trade and foreign investment. In 2005, after 10 years under the TRADP, the Changchun Agreement, held in Changchun, China, sought to continue the program for an additional 10 years. The name, however, was changed to the Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI) due to an extension of boundaries and the involvement of the private sector. The GTI consists of all of the TRADP member countries, excluding North Korea. In addition, it now included three provinces (Jilin Province, Hei Long Jiang Province, and Liaoning Province) and Inner Mongolia of China, Eastern provinces of Mongolia, Primorsky Territory in Russia, and Eastern port cities in South Korea. The GTI was defined as an “intergovernmental cooperation mechanism in North-East Asia” (GTI 2009). Its main objectives were regional stability, economic cooperation, and sustainable growth. GTI identified four development sectors: energy, trade and investment, transportation, and tourism.

Member Countries

China was the first country to show interest in developing the Tumen region. The economy in northeast China is not as developed as that of the eastern coastal regions, although having access to a port in the northeast would increase the economy in the region. Having access to the Tumen transport corridor would allow China to have easier access to trade routes that extend through Russia into Western Europe. Primorsky Territory is the largest economy in Far East Russia and the GTI region. Developing this area allows Russia to access the abundant natural resources in the GTI region while developing coal and metals mining, ship building, and transport industries. The GTI provides the infrastructure and financing that Russia lacks in order to develop the Primorsky Territory. North Korea, on the other hand, did not partake in the GTI possibly due to a lack of cooperation with the member countries and disagreements with South Korea. The GTI could have benefited North Korea in several ways such as, helping combat
severe economic problems due to large-scale military spending and ending economic isolation. South Korea has limited natural resources; hence, its economy depends mainly on manufactured goods and technology such as semiconductors and computers. The GTI allows South Korea access to the abundant natural resources in Russia and more efficient transportation and shipping connections through the Sea of Japan. Eastern Mongolia is a remote and underdeveloped region. It is one of the largest undisturbed steppe ecosystems in the world. Mongolia hopes to strengthen its economy and reduce poverty by increasing both tourism in the region and trade through the Tumen transport corridor.

Four Development Sectors

Energy

The GTI Energy Board was established in 2007 to help facilitate energy projects in the Greater Tumen Region. The Energy Board’s main objectives were to improve energy security and move towards cleaner energy. Currently, it oversees the construction of a 220 kV AC power line called the Tumen River Area Power Transmission “Ring”, in which Russia, North Korea, and China are the future beneficiaries. Also due to a large amount of uranium in the Mongolian region, it now supervises the building of a nuclear power plant in Mongolia from which China hopes to import electricity upon completion. The Energy Board seeks to build a partnership between Mongolia and Russia as a result of the former’s lack of experience in undertaking energy projects. The construction of the Primorsky Oil Refinery was a previous GTI energy project in Russia. The high-tech oil refinery in Primorsky Territory, with a production capacity of 20 million tons of oil per year, was built to keep up with the demand for petroleum and to take advantage of the natural resources in Far East Russia.

Trade and Investment

The GTI hopes to involve the private sector and international investors in the development of the Greater Tumen Region by building partnerships between the member countries’ governments and private companies. As a result, it plans to provide tax incentives and other benefits for investing in the region. Currently, the Trade Facilitation Committee is being established to facilitate regional trade and cooperation between member countries. Other projects include developing northeast China by upgrading the manufacturing equipment industry.

Transportation

The member countries of the GTI have the potential to be connected to trade routes throughout Europe and Asia. Hence, projects like the Tumen transport corridor are crucial for access to new and existing markets; the corridor allows China, who is land-locked in the northeast, access to a northeast port in the Sea of Japan. In 2007, the GTI proposed the China-North Korea road and harbor project. It involved the reconstruction of a road and bridge that linked Hunchun Kwanhe, China to Rajin, North Korea and further development of Rajin Harbor; the latter was operating at about 10% of its capacity before 2007 and remains underutilized. The reconstruction of the road and bridge is also slow due to difficulties communicating with North Korea. The GTI planned the development of the Hunchun (China)-Makhalino (Russia) Railway, which was constructed in 1999 and became the shortest route for cargo from Jilin...
Province in Yanbian Prefecture to the Sea of Japan. The Railway was operational until 2004 when, due to disagreements between two Russian railway companies, it was suspended. The Railway remains inactive despite legal actions and coordination from the GTI. Other current GTI transportation projects in the area include a railway feasibility study from Mongolia to China, the development of Zarubino port in Russia, and the creation of the NEA Ferry Route: a triangular route connecting Rason, South Korea, and Japan.

**Tourism**

The Tumen River has a history of being a tourist attraction despite its heavy pollution. In 2002, the GTI published a tourism guide entitled “The Tumen River Area New Horizon in Travel” in many different languages, including Japanese and English. The GTI established a goal of increasing international visitors to its member countries by 10-15% each year since 2006. The GTI Tourism Council was established in 2009 to further develop this industry. For example, a current study on the feasibility of sustainable development of the Changbai Mountains is being conducted in order to lay the foundation for increased tourism projects in the area. In addition, the Tourism Council is in the beginning stages of developing tourism in eastern Mongolia.

**Environment**

The GTI pledges a central theme of environmental protection in all of its projects; however, are unable to enforce any proposals. In 1995, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed by the member countries to show their cooperation for protecting the environment of the Greater Tumen Region. The MOU’s goal was “cooperation in protecting the environment of the Tumen Region and hinterland” (GTI 2009). The GTI Environment Board was established in 2007 and proposed two projects: environmental cooperation in North-East Asia and a feasibility study on Tumen River Water Protection. Under the environmental cooperation project, Environment Impact Assessments are required for all the GTI projects. The Environment Board hopes to standardize the statements and create a shared network to communicate more efficiently between countries. The feasibility study assesses water and air pollution of the region, deforestation and soil erosion, and endangered species in the region. Endangered species include the Far-eastern Leopard, the Siberian Tiger, and many migratory birds. There is also concern about deforestation of the taiga forest in northern Mongolia and Siberia, due to its slow regeneration. Again, the majority of pollutants in the Tumen River are from industrial discharges, mainly from Chinese sources, including paper and pulp mills. Recently, water in the lower reaches of the Tumen River tributaries has been deemed unfit for municipal use. Despite growing concerns, the GTI Environment Board hopes to promote sustainable development in the region by public awareness and community involvement.

**Questions**

- Should there be a push to include North Korea as a member country, when oftentimes it refuses to cooperate? Can the GTI move forward without North Korea?
The GTI and the MOU do not have any enforcement powers regarding the environment. With many private sector companies investing in projects, could there be potential problems with exploitation of resources, land, and wildlife?

- UNDP does not want to be involved in environmental issues, only intergovernmental relations.

Will the common goal of economic development be enough to force the member countries to cooperate? Can issues like climate change allow the countries to come together?

- What actions can be taken to make sure China does not dominate the GTI projects?

**Required Reading**


References


