

Thinking Beyond China When Dealing with North Korea: Is There a Role for Russia?

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E-Notes

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Executive Summary

Washington's continued fixation on China as the only route to the solution of the North Korea nuclear problem is misplaced. It ignores other factors and actors that have an impact and can contribute to the resolution of the ongoing crisis on the Korean Peninsula. Russia is one such actor that is often overlooked.

Russia is now the only major country that is on more or less friendly terms with Pyongyang. Its current economic leverage with the North comes mostly from the importation of North Korean labor, which provides Pyongyang with a vital source of cash. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) trusts no person or country, but it probably distrusts Russia much less than China and the United States. This dynamic gives Russia a potential diplomatic role in the North Korean problem.

The Kremlin does not support using high pressure tactics against Pyongyang, especially military options, as it might have unpredictable and disastrous consequences for the entire Northeast Asian region. Moscow is committed to the denuclearization of North Korea, but sees it as a long-term goal, while the most realistic objective at present should be a North Korean nuclear and missile moratorium, or "freeze."

For Russia, the North Korea question cannot be separated from the larger issues within the Northeast Asian

geopolitical architecture. In this regard, the Kremlin is opposed to the continued U.S. primacy, but it also does not wish the arrival of a Chinese regional hegemony.

Unlike China, Russia is extremely worried about the menace of a nuclear-armed North Korea undermining the global non-proliferation regime. In this regard, Russian and U.S. interests come together, creating possibilities for collaboration. However, the prospects for Russia-U.S. cooperation on North Korea will, to a great extent, depend on the state of their bilateral relationship.

Two policy recommendations are in order. *First*, a mechanism of regular U.S.- Russian consultations on the Korean Peninsula security problems should be established. *Second*, Moscow and Washington should prioritize collaboration to prevent possible horizontal proliferation of North Korean nuclear technologies and materials, such as attempts by the North Korean regime or by its rogue individual representatives to sell nuclear components to other states or non-state actors.

Introduction

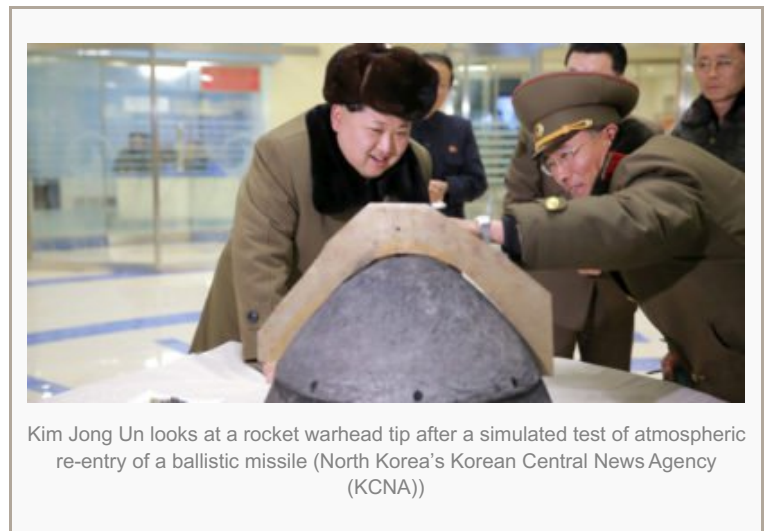
North Korea is accelerating its drive toward full-fledged nuclear capability. Undeterred by universal international condemnation and ever-tightening sanctions, since January 2016, the North has conducted two nuclear tests and scores of missile launches. It is widely believed that Pyongyang is in possession of medium and intermediate-range missiles that already may be able to carry nuclear warheads. These missiles can reach South Korea, Japan, parts of China and Russia, and possibly the U.S. territory of Guam. North Korea may acquire intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capability in a few more years. If North Korea develops and deploys a nuclear-tipped ICBM, it will mark the first time a non-allied country [has acquired the capability to strike the continental United States](#) with atomic weapons since China in 1981. And, unlike China, in the early 1980s, the DPRK sees America as its main enemy.

Fixation on China



It is not surprising, then, that the first overseas trips by U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson were to Northeast Asia, with North Korea dominating the agenda of their meetings in Tokyo, Seoul, and Beijing. Having arrived in Northeast Asia, Tillerson declared that the previous U.S. policy of “strategic patience” toward Pyongyang had failed, and the U.S. would develop a new approach. However, so far, there are no visible signs that the Trump White House is pursuing a North Korea policy that would be much different from the administrations of Barack Obama and George W. Bush. As is clear from remarks by Tillerson and other officials, Washington is banking on

the combination of military deterrence and sanctions, which was essentially the stance taken by the previous administrations. Also, in continuation with its predecessors, the Trump national security team sees China as having



Kim Jong Un looks at a rocket warhead tip after a simulated test of atmospheric re-entry of a ballistic missile (North Korea's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA))

exclusive leverage over North Korea and seeks to get Beijing to apply meaningful pressure to the DPRK.

It is logical to assume that, if this approach failed under the Obama administration, it is not likely to work now with a new administration. One major flaw with this strategy is that it sees China as the lynchpin to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. Even though Beijing may not be happy with Pyongyang's nuclear aspirations, China has always been reluctant to do the heavy lifting with regard to North Korea on behalf of the United States. If Beijing goes along with Washington and squeezes the North really hard by cutting off trade and financial transactions, then those policies may cause the collapse of the DPRK, an outcome which remains unacceptable to the Chinese. A North Korean implosion might create instability along the lengthy Sino-North Korean border, sending millions of refugees into northeastern China. Most importantly, Beijing is concerned that, following the North's demise, the Korean Peninsula will be reunified by pro-American Seoul, thus shifting the Northeast Asian geopolitical balance in favor of the United States—and to the detriment of China.

[Some would even argue](#) that Beijing “uses North Korea like a thug nation to do some of its dirtier jobs and act as a buffer against nations it sees as potentially hostile like South Korea and Japan.” One can speculate that, from the Chinese perspective, North Korea's acquiring nuclear capability, including ICBMs, may not be such a bad thing, after all. The North Korean missile threat could eventually force the United States to disengage from its ally South Korea in order to avoid a possible atomic attack against the homeland. If America withdraws from the Korean Peninsula, it will be a major geopolitical coup for China.

Even if Beijing were truly interested in denuclearizing North Korea, its actual leverage over the recalcitrant neighbor and formal junior ally may be quite limited. Think of Israel's nuclear breakout in the 1960s. Despite their presumable dependence on the United States, the Israelis defied Washington and went ahead with its nuclear program. Imperatives of survival in an extremely hostile environment trump any amount of persuasion and pressure from the senior ally.

Whether or not Beijing truly desires a non-nuclear North Korea, there is ample evidence that China has been lax in enforcing the international sanctions that it supported at the UN Security Council. The [latest UN Panel of Experts report](#) documents multiple cases of Chinese entities doing illicit business with the DPRK as well as North Korean designated entities freely operating on Chinese soil. [Some sanctions experts](#) believe that Beijing “has expressed no intention to systematically enforce restrictions on North Korean networks operating from its territory.” Most alarmingly, some China-related cases involve proliferation activities. In particular, North Korea is suspected of operating a lithium-6 production plant. Lithium-6 is a critical raw material needed for the production of single-stage thermonuclear and boosted fission weapons. In order to make the plant operational, North Korea procured from China a wide range of industrial- and lab-scale equipment and materials, [including mercury and lithium hydroxide](#). The DPRK also tried to sell lithium-6 online [through its agents in China](#).

Rex Tillerson's visit to Beijing featured a lot of public warmth between him and his hosts, including President Xi Jinping of China. This new dynamic, however, does not mean that China has finally agreed to get tough on North Korea. To send a [positive gesture to the Trump administration](#), Beijing may somewhat broaden its punishments against the DPRK, but will most likely stop short of subjecting it to the full-scale embargo that Washington demands. In order to force China to tighten the noose around the Pyongyang regime, [the Trump administration is considering](#) secondary sanctions against Chinese banks and firms doing business with North Korea. However, there are serious doubts that escalating pressure on Chinese financial institutions can bring the desired effects. China is a great power, or at least aspires to be one. For great powers, vital geopolitical interests almost always stand above trade and financial considerations. Think of Russia: it has not yielded to Western economic sanctions over Ukraine. For China, the Korean Peninsula is nearly as important strategically as Ukraine is for Russia.



Looking beyond China: Is There Any Role for Russia?

It cannot be denied that China is a key actor when it comes to the North Korea nuclear problem. However, Washington exhibits tunnel vision syndrome, being obsessed with China as the only way to solve the North Korean nuclear problem. Fixated on China, U.S. policymakers lose sight of other factors and players that meaningfully can contribute to the resolution of the ongoing Korean nuclear crisis. Moscow is all too often overlooked by Western policy circles as a force to be reckoned with when it comes to Korean affairs.^[1] Yet, Russia is a power which has been closely involved with Korea since the late 19th century and retains significant geopolitical stakes in the Korean Peninsula.

Russia shares a land border with North Korea and has a wealth of experience in dealing with the Kim dynasty, which it installed in power some 70 years ago. Moreover, Russia is now the only country of consequence with whom Pyongyang remains more or less on friendly terms. Although China is still the North's only treaty ally and by far its biggest trade partner, relations between Beijing and Pyongyang have recently been marked by growing acrimony and distrust.^[2]

What is Russia's Leverage with North Korea?

In terms of transportation links, Russia is the only country, apart from China, that maintains regular overland traffic with the DPRK and allows *Air Koryo*, the North Korean flag carrier, to perform scheduled flights (currently twice a week via the Vladivostok airport).^[3] The DPRK's dependence on the Russian corridor was highlighted in February 2017 when, after [Kim Jong Nam's murder](#) in the Kuala Lumpur airport, the four North Korean suspects hastily returned to Pyongyang via Moscow and Vladivostok, avoiding Chinese routes. Reportedly, Russia refused the South Korean request to detain the North Koreans, citing the lack of legal grounds.^[4]

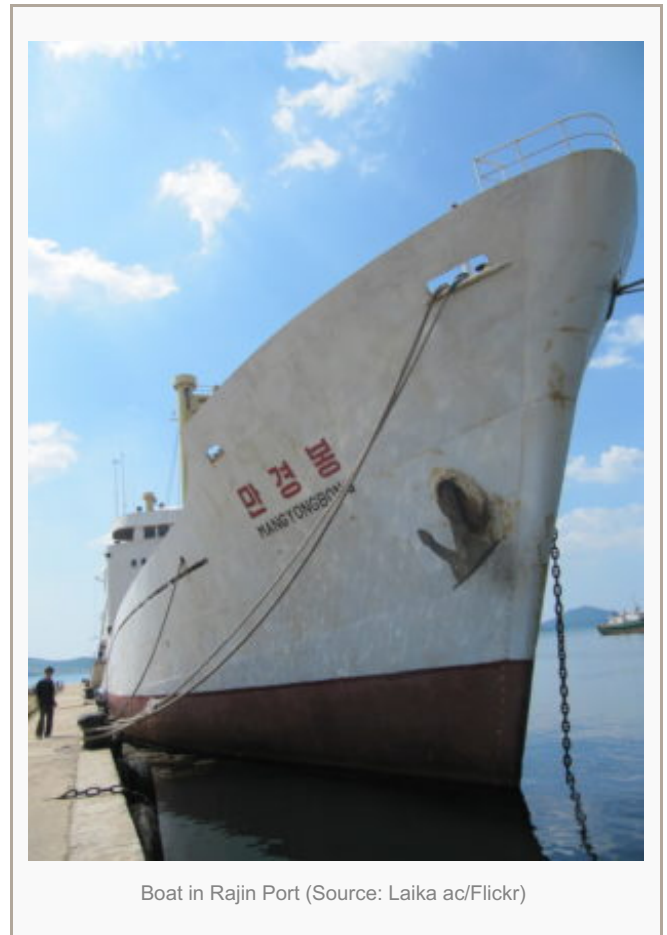
It is true that Russia's trade and financial interactions with North Korea pale in comparison to Sino-North Korean commerce. In 2016, the volume of direct Russia–DPRK trade stood at a mere \$69 million.^[5] Russia's investment in the DPRK has been limited to a single, albeit substantial, project which involved the upgrade of the 54-kilometer rail link between the Russian railway station of Khasan and the North Korean port of Rajin and construction of a cargo terminal there.^[6]

Somewhat counterintuitively, Russia's relatively small trade and investment ties with the DPRK may give Moscow political advantages in relations with the North. The fact that North Korea depends on China for 70 to 90% of its external trade and most of its foreign inbound investment makes Pyongyang deeply uneasy. The North Koreans know very well that one-sided economic dependence on China is fraught with the loss of political independence. Pyongyang must have taken notice when Mongolia, 75% of its exports go to China, had to kowtow to Beijing after the Chinese government imposed economic sanctions to punish Ulan Bator for allowing [the Dalai Lama to visit the country](#).^[7] Ironically, Beijing's economic retaliation against South Korea in response to Seoul's decision to permit the stationing of a THAAD missile defense battery is another testimony to the dangers inherent in heavy trade dependence on China.^[8] As long as Moscow does not wield overwhelming economic leverage over the North, it makes it more trustworthy in the eyes of Pyongyang.^[9]



Air Koryo IL-62M (Source: Yaoleilei/WikiMedia Commons)

Still, there is one commercial area where relations with Russia are of major importance to the North: the export of North Korean labor. Russia is the biggest recipient of officially contracted workers from the DPRK. In recent years, the number of North Korean guest workers in Russia stands within the range of 30,000-40,000.^[10] This number may well increase. The North Koreans, who are mainly employed in construction and agriculture, have a reputation for being disciplined and hard-working. As Russia experiences chronic labor shortages, especially in DDD jobs, the demand for North Korean labor is guaranteed. With the Russian economy finally [emerging out of recession](#), this demand is only expected to grow. In the eyes of many Russians, North Koreans have a major advantage over guest workers from Central Asia, who currently constitute the main source of labor migration to Russia, since the DPRK citizens are non-Muslims and hence are perceived not to pose a terrorist threat. In March 2017, the deputy director of Migration Department of Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs visited Pyongyang to discuss further cooperation regarding North Korean labor exports to Russia.^[11] North Korea has reportedly begun using a transit railway route via China [to dispatch workers to western parts of Russia](#) in what may be another sign of Pyongyang's intention to export to Russia a larger workforce at a lower transportation cost.



Boat in Rajin Port (Source: Laika ac/Flickr)

It is well-known that North Korean workers abroad must "share" a substantial part of their earnings with the DPRK government. Pyongyang's annual revenue from the North Korean guest workers in Russia is estimated at \$110-170 million.^[12] Given the [shrinking opportunities for foreign currency](#) earnings due to China's coal ban and the crisis in relations with traditional Southeast Asian partners in the wake of Kim Jong Nam's assassination in Kuala Lumpur,

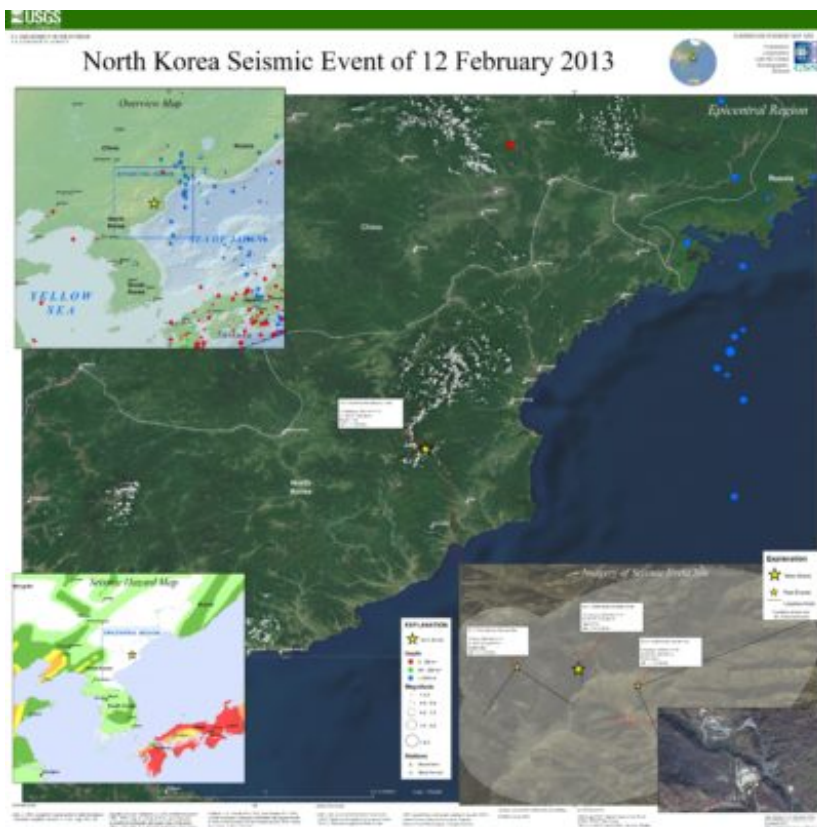
the cash generated by the North Koreans dispatched to Russia becomes even more critical for the regime. Some North Koreans, returning from Russia with sizable sums of money by the North's standards, invest the savings in business ventures. Thus, they contribute to the ongoing *de facto* marketization of the DPRK's economy that has been accelerating under Kim Jong Un. It is no less significant that the North Korean workers who spend a few years in Russia cannot but undergo cognitive changes, having experienced the life in a "normal" country.

Hosting North Korean students is another "soft power" channel of influence that Russia has with the DPRK. After China, Russia is the second biggest recipient of students from the DPRK, even though their actual number is relatively small (no more than 150). Some of them are sent from North Korea specifically to study in Russian universities, while others are children of the DPRK diplomatic officers and trade representatives stationed in Russia. Most of North Koreans attend universities and colleges in Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, and Moscow. Russia seeks to keep education exchanges with North Korea afloat and even expand them.^[13] As part of this effort, in late January 2017, the deputy head of Russian Railway Agency and the president of the Khabarovsk-based Far Eastern Railway University visited Pyongyang and signed two agreements on the training of North Korean railway technicians and engineers in Russia.^[14]

The new rounds of international sanctions imposed on North Korea in 2016 have taken a toll on Russia-DPRK relations. The volume of bilateral trade fell from \$84 million in 2015 to \$69 million in 2016, while most commercial projects that had been under consideration before 2016 now have been put on hold. In compliance with the UN sanctions, Russia severed banking links with the DPRK, making it almost impossible for Russian companies to do any meaningful business with North Korea.^[15] To signal its unhappiness about the North Korean nuke tests and missile launches, Russia has also curtailed political contacts with the DPRK, at least those that are publicly visible. There have been no high-level (ministerial and above) contacts between Russia and the DPRK since January 2016, the only exception being the meeting between Russian and North Korean ministers of culture in Saint Petersburg in December 2016.

However, Russia is adamant in its stance that it retains the right to pursue cooperation with the DPRK in areas not explicitly prohibited by the UN sanctions. Russia is opposed to expansive interpretation and application of UN sanctions against North Korea. As one example, a North Korean military delegation led by Vice Minister of the People's Armed Forces was invited by Russian Defense Ministry to participate in the International Military Technical Forum in Moscow in September 2016. In its reply to a request from the UN Panel of Experts, [the Russian Mission to the UN pointed out](#) that the participation of the DPRK representatives in the military forum "did not fall under the current sanctions regime." In a similar vein, Moscow has repeatedly emphasized that it will not recognize unilateral sanctions, such as designations of North Korean entities and individuals adopted by the United States or South Korea. This approach resembles China's policy on the North Korea sanctions. However, unlike China, Russia has a much better record of compliance with the UN sanctions imposed on North Korea. While the latest Panel of Exports report is rife with egregious examples of how China, as well as some other countries, fail to enforce UN sanctions, [the document has very few issues with Russia](#). It is also noteworthy that, according to the report, Russia agreed to act as an intermediary for the United Nations agencies working in North Korea so that they could resume transferring funds for their activities there after their financial operations were disrupted by the sweeping banking ban prescribed by the UNSC Resolution 2270. In August 2016, [the UN sanctions committee](#) on North Korea approved a Russian banking channel for the United Nations agencies operating in the DPRK.

Russian Approach to the North Korea Nuclear Problem



Whereas, for China, denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is at best a secondary priority, Russia is loath to accept a nuclear North Korea. It may be argued that, when it comes to the importance of non-proliferation, Moscow's positions are closer to Washington's than Beijing's. Although the North's nuclear test site is just 200 miles from Vladivostok, Russia does not feel directly threatened by Kim's nukes. However, the North's continued nuclearization—and the chain reaction of horizontal proliferation this may trigger in Northeast Asia and beyond—will inevitably devalue Russia's own nuclear arsenal which the Russians see as the Holy Grail, an essential attribute of their nation's great power status and the ultimate guarantee of national security. For China, nuclear weapons do not carry such an existential significance. Beijing has traditionally looked at nuclear weapons in a much more instrumental fashion and has been far more relaxed about nuclear proliferation. It is an open secret, for example, that, [in the 1980s, the](#)

[Chinese government](#) provided Pakistan with blueprints for the bomb, as well as highly enriched uranium, tritium, and other key components. Unlike China and some other countries, such as France, Russia has never deliberately spread military nuclear technology. The alleged involvement of [Russian rocket engineers in the North Korean missile program in the 1990s](#) only became possible because the Russian government was then in a state of semi-meltdown, unable to provide for, and control, its military-industrial complex. When, in the late 1990s, the Russian state began to emerge from the post-Soviet chaos, proliferation leakages stopped.

Although Russia is strongly averse to the prospect of a nuclear-armed North Korea, there is an almost unanimous consensus among the Russian foreign policy community that denuclearization is hardly possible in the foreseeable future. Russian policymakers and analysts acknowledge that nuclear capability is probably the only way for the North Korean regime to guarantee its security in an environment where all the other odds are against Pyongyang. Moscow believes that, under present circumstances, the best possible option would be a North Korean nuclear and

missile moratorium (the so-called “freeze”) in exchange for substantial concessions from the United States and South Korea, such as scaling back the alliance’s military activities on the Korean Peninsula and easing the sanctions regime.[16] Denuclearization should remain as a long-term goal that can only be achieved after a profound transformation of the security environment in Northeast Asia which is currently characterized by high degrees of mutual distrust.

When referring to the worsening security situation around the Korean Peninsula, Moscow tends to put equal blame on North Korea and the United States with its allies, South Korea, and Japan. Russian officials invariably emphasize the “destabilizing” nature of what they see as the “military buildup” by U.S.-centric alliances in Northeast Asia, including “large-scale military drills to rehearse offensive operations against North Korea” and the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system to South Korea.[17] Many Russian policymakers and experts are convinced that the United States uses the North Korea nuclear issue as a convenient excuse for seeking “unilateral military advantages” and “massive injection of new weapons into the region.”[18]

What is, then, Moscow’s recipe for the solution to the North Korea problem? The oft-repeated formula used by the Russian Foreign Ministry speaks of the need for “comprehensive settlement through political-diplomatic means, taking into account the concerns of all parties involved.” Another part of the formula stresses the necessity of a “general military-political détente and dismantlement of the confrontational architecture in the region.”[19] Translated from *diplomatese*, this means, *first*, that Russia rejects military options as well as hard-pressure methods, such as crippling sanctions, in dealing with North Korea. *Second*, the solution should respect vital interests and concerns of all parties, including North Korea and Russia itself. *Third*, not only North Korea’s nuclear problem but also other strategic issues should be on the table, such as the level of the American military presence in Northeast Asia. *Fourth*, Northeast Asia should start moving toward a new security architecture in which the exclusive U.S.-led alliances are replaced with institutions inclusive of all key regional powers, including Russia.

Russia’s stance on North Korea and the future of Northeast Asian order may seem identical to China’s in that it does not accept continuation of the U.S. hegemony. However, there is one cardinal difference: China seeks to replace the U.S. strategic dominance of East Asia with one of its own. For Russia, Beijing’s primacy in the region would be just as unacceptable as Washington’s. What Moscow wants is a concert-like, multipolar balance-of-power system with Russia as one of its key stakeholders.

Russia continues to favor resumption of the Six-Party Talks, viewing them as the most relevant mechanism to achieve a comprehensive and lasting solution to the North Korea nuclear problem. Furthermore, Moscow sees the Six-Party Talks as a prelude to the establishment of an institutional arrangement in charge of Northeast Asian security. Russia is also open to other multilateral initiatives such as the Northeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon Free Zone promoted by Mongolia, which calls for security guarantees to non-nuclear states by nuclear-capable nations.



A major part of the Russian calculus has to do with inter-Korean politics. Moscow has long insisted that it is impossible to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem without substantial improvement in North-South relations. After the departure of Park Geun-hye, who mostly pursued confrontational policies toward Pyongyang, it looks likely that the next elected president will be more accommodating to the North.[20] This possibility somewhat raises the chances for renewed diplomacy in bilateral and multilateral formats.

Russia is unlikely to support any tough moves against Pyongyang that could lead to the collapse of the DPRK. The Kremlin is allergic to any notion of regime change and suspects that Washington's and Seoul's hard-line policies against Pyongyang are motivated as much by the desire to strangle the North Korean regime as to solve the nuclear problem. Even more worrisome for Moscow, the demise of the DPRK would most likely result in the emergence of a re-unified Korean state that would be pro-Western and allied with the United States. As long as Russia has complicated relations with the United States, Russia will oppose South Korean-led reunification scenarios. As a general rule, the worse U.S.-Russia relations are, the more inclined Moscow will be to refrain from any actions that might push the North over the cliff's edge. Unless Pyongyang does something really egregious, such as testing a two-hundred kiloton nuclear device, there is little chance Moscow would agree to significantly expand the existing UN sanctions.

Conclusion

Washington's continued fixation on China as the only route to the solution of the North Korea nuclear problem tends to ignore other factors and actors—like Russia—that have an impact and can contribute to the resolution of the ongoing crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

Russia is now the only major country that is on more or less friendly terms with Pyongyang. The country's current economic leverage with the North comes mostly in the form of importing North Korean labor that provides Pyongyang with a vital source of cash. The DPRK trusts nobody, but it probably distrusts Russia much less than it does China and the United States. This dynamic gives Russia a potential diplomatic role in the North Korean problem.

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For Russia, the North Korea question cannot be separated from the larger issues of Northeast Asian geopolitical architecture. In this regard, the Kremlin is opposed to the continued U.S. primacy, but neither does it wish the arrival of a Chinese regional hegemony.

Unlike China, Russia is extremely worried about the menace of a nuclear-armed North Korea undermining the global non-proliferation regime. In this regard, Russian and U.S. interests come together, creating possibilities for collaboration. However, the prospects for Russia-U.S. cooperation on North Korea will, to a great extent, depend on the state of their bilateral relationship.



A B-52 overflies Korea in response to North Korean nuclear test in January 2016.

[1] For example, the recent report on North Korea by Brookings Institution, even though it recognizes the unwisdom of relying exclusively on China, never mentions Russia (Evans Revere. 2017: *Year of decision on the Korean peninsula*. March 2, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp->

[content/uploads/2017/03/fp_20170208_evans_revere_krins.pdf](#)). Similarly, Chatham House's John Nilsson-Wright argues that "careful coordination between the U.S., South Korea, Japan, and China" is needed, omitting Russia (John Nilsson-Wright. "North Korea's intercontinental nuclear threat is real." March 10, 2017, <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/comment/north-koreas-intercontinental-nuclear-threat-real-us-act/>).

[2] In a symbolic move, North Korea has begun placing Russia at the top of the list of the countries to whom Kim Jong Un's Lunar New Year greeting cards are sent, whereas under Kim Jong Il North Korea messages would list China first ("North Korea lists Russia first among countries friendly with regime." Feb. 3, 2017, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2017/02/03/North-Korea-lists-Russia-first-among-countries-friendly-with-regime/5681486180493/).

[3] Incidentally, *Air Koryo's* fleet entirely consists of Russian-made aircraft, meaning dependence on spare parts and some maintenance services.

[4] In Seoul reported on the refusal of Russia to detain suspects in the murder of his brother, Kim Jong-UN. Feb. 28, 2017, <http://24-my.info/in-seoul-reported-on-the-refusal-of-russia-to-detain-suspects-in-the-murder-of-his-brother-kim-jong-un/> . (An Interpol notice on the four male North Korean suspects linked to the February murder of Kim Jong Nam was issued only March 16, 2017).

[5] This figure does not take into account the indirect shipments to North Korea of Russian-originated goods, mainly oil and fuel-related products, being re-exported via China. The volume of this indirect trade between Russia and the DPRK is estimated to reach hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars.

[6] As of January 2017, the volume of investment in the Khasan-Rajin project amounted to 216 mln euros (Russian Embassy in the DPRK official website, <http://www.rusembdprk.ru/ru/rossiya-i-kndr/torgovo-ekonomicheskoe-sotrudnichestvo>).

[7] Threatened with a partial trade blockade and the denial of a loan by China, the Mongolian government was forced to express "regret" over the Dalai Lama visit and pledged that he would not be allowed to visit the country again even for religious purposes, despite the fact that Mongolia is a predominantly Buddhist country whose people revere the Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader ("Mongolia Says Dalai Lama Will Not Be Allowed Future Visits." Dec. 21, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/mongolia-dalai-lama-allowed-future-visits-44319702>).

[8] "Chinese stop coming to Korea." Korea JoongAng Daily, March 16, 2017, <http://mengnews.joins.com/view.aspx?ald=3031036>

[9] This observation is owed to Anastasia Barannikova, a North Korea researcher with Maritime State University in Vladivostok.

[10] China may host a higher number of North Korean labor migrants, but many of them are staying there illegally.

[11] News Release, March 18, 2017. Russian Embassy in the DPRK official website, <http://www.rusembdprk.ru/ru/posolstvo/novosti-posolstva/357-o-sedmom-zasedanii-rossijsko-korejskoj-rabochej-gruppy-po-resheniyu-voprosov-svyazannykh-s-realizatsiej-mezhpravsovlasheniya-o-vremennoj-trudovoj-deyatelnosti>

[12] This figure is based on the ongoing research of Russian-North Korean relations by the team of scholars in Vladivostok and Moscow.

[13] Of course, this does not apply to proliferation-sensitive areas, specified by UN sanctions, that are now off limits to North Koreans wishing to study in Russia.

[14] News Release, January 30, 2017. Russian Embassy in the DPRK official Facebook page,

https://www.facebook.com/RusEmbDPRK/?ref=page_internal

[15] The only major exception is the Russia-controlled venture Rasonkontrans which continues to operate the Khasan-Rajin rail link and is engaged in transporting Russian coal through the North Korean port of Rajin (Rason), mostly to Chinese consumers. The transportation of non-DPRK coal through Rajin is specifically exempted by the UNSC Resolutions 2270 (March 2016) and 2321 (November 2016). In 2016, the volume of Russian-originated cargoes handled by Rasonkontrans even slightly increased, to 1.7 mln tons.

[16] See, for example, the article by Gleb Ivashentsov, Russia's former ambassador to South Korea ("Tillerson's threats and the Korean zugzwang." Russian International Affairs Council, March 21, 2017, http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=8844#top-content).

[17] Transcript of the briefing by Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova. March 23, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2703372#20

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[20] Georgy Toloraya. "The spring of changes." Russian International Affairs Council. March 17, 2017, http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=8834#top-content