

A NEW INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR NORTH KOREA?

Contending Perspectives

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Russian–North Korean Relations and the Prospects for Multilateral Conflict Resolution on the Korean Peninsula

Alexandre Y. Mansourov

Russia fought two limited wars against Pacific powers on the Korean peninsula: first against Japan in 1904–05 and then against the United States and its overseas allies 50 years later, in 1950–53. Both times Russia suffered considerable setbacks and failed to achieve its primary goal: keeping the peninsula free of the expanding maritime influences hostile to Russia's continental power.

Now, at the dawn of the new millennium, Korea is faced with the possibility of another major geopolitical shock, namely the upcoming unification of the peninsula. Obviously, such a radical transformation of the existing political and socioeconomic frameworks cannot leave Russia uninterested and passive (even despite its lingering internal woes) and is sure to focus Russian attention on peninsular affairs once again. How does a reborn Russia—itsself in transition to democracy and open markets—react to the simmering North Korean nuclear crisis and the intensifying inter-Korean reconciliation? Will Russia try to influence these developments in the direction of favoring Russian national interests? Will Moscow sit on the sidelines as it did in the 1990s, or will it actively participate in shaping the future of the Korean nation as it used to do during Soviet times? Will the Kremlin prefer the application of force, as in the past, or creative peaceful diplomacy?

Some Generalizations about Russian Policy Approaches to Korea

First, the Korean peninsula tends to occupy a secondary place in the Russian Far Eastern policy that places its primary emphasis on relations with the regional heavyweights—the People's Republic of China (PRC), Japan, and the United States. Russian-Korean relations are often subordinate to broader goals and depend on the dynamics of Russian relations with other regional

powers. Historically, Russian national interests in Korea tend to be strategic in nature, rather than economic. At present, the meteoric rise of China, economic decline and remilitarization of Japan, and U.S. global hegemony inevitably shape the Northeast Asian geopolitical context within which Russian policy toward the Korean peninsula has to be formulated.

Second, as a rule, Korean affairs tend to be handled primarily by the department-level bureaucrats within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense and by trade officials. Rarely is an issue of Korean policy brought to the attention of national leadership or made a subject of domestic political debate. Hence, policy breakthroughs are rare, and policy innovations tend to be incremental and slow. Three glaring exceptions to this rule were Stalin's personal role in decision making regarding the Korean War in 1950–53, Gorbachev's personal involvement in the normalization of Soviet-Republic of Korea (ROK) relations in 1989–90, and President Putin's personal diplomacy with Kim Jong-il in 2000–02.

Third, by and large, Russian policy toward Korea has always been passive, reactive, and rather cautious; the exception was Stalin's underwriting of Kim Il-sung's Korean War initiative. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a dramatic decline in Russian conventional military capabilities in the Far East and Russia's military preoccupation with the extremist Islamic terrorist threat in the South (emanating from the Caucasus and Central Asia) have contributed to further moderation of Russian foreign policy goals on the Korean peninsula. Russia's foreign policy goals vis-à-vis Korea are fundamentally and essentially conservative, status quo oriented, and consensus seeking.

Fourth, the geopolitical concerns, ruling ideologies, and political affinities of governing regimes tend to play a relatively larger role in Russian policy toward the Koreas than the consideration of Russian economic interests or humanitarian concerns. Moreover, currently unresolved mutual debt issues and the increasing fragility of the Russian Far East and its economy, stemming from progressive depopulation and deindustrialization, perennial economic crises, rampant local corruption and crime, and the looming threat of political disintegration in the past decade, tend to undermine the languid central government efforts aimed at encouraging cross-border and regional economic cooperation between the Russian Far Eastern provinces and the two Korean states.

One of the leading indications of renewed Russian positive interest in Korean affairs was the first-ever official state visit paid by the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin, to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) on 19–20 July 2000. In the centuries-old history of bilateral Russian-Korean relations, the Russian czars refused to notice this proud, tiny hermit kingdom on the remote border of the Russian Far East. The Soviet Communist leaders loved to pamper the North, whereas the first post-Communist Russian rulers despised and isolated it. Hence, Putin's Pyongyang trip was an accomplishment of historical significance, unimaginable even during the

glorious years of the tight USSR-DPRK military alliance during the 1940s–80s, not to mention the decade of mutual Russian–North Korean abandonment and estrangement in the 1990s.

Summit Diplomacy in the 2000s

At the onset of the third millennium, a new political leadership in the Kremlin, headed by a young, dynamic, and pragmatic premier-elected-president, Vladimir V. Putin, decided to capitalize on all the positive changes that had been accumulated in Russian-DPRK relations since 1996 and opened a new era in state-to-state relations between the two countries. After several delays and exhaustive diplomatic consultations, the Russian foreign minister, Igor S. Ivanov, visited Pyongyang on 9–10 February 2000 and signed a new bilateral Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation to replace the defunct USSR-DPRK alliance treaty of 1961.¹ The conclusion of the new treaty ensures the continuity of traditional friendship; takes into account the national interests of both countries; and provides a contemporary legal framework for further development of Russian-DPRK relations on the basis of new principles of equality, state sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in domestic affairs, good-neighborliness, and mutually beneficial cooperation.

The Pyongyang Summit

To cement a new phase in Russian-DPRK relations and open new constructive possibilities for Russia to participate in the international peaceful resolution of the Korean problem and other issues of multilateral concern in Northeast Asia, President Putin led an official state delegation² to visit the DPRK on 19–20 July 2000.³ The visit came a month after the historic inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang on 13–15 June. This was the first official visit by any Soviet or Russian head of state to North Korea. President Putin was also the first foreign leader to visit Pyongyang at the invitation of General Secretary Kim Jong-il since 1994.

1 The Russian State Duma ratified the new treaty by the overwhelming majority of 363 votes on 19 July 2000. The Russian Federation Council approved of this ratification on 26 July 2000. President Putin signed the law on the ratification of this treaty on 5 August 2000 (MOFA 2000).

2 The official delegation included Deputy Prime Minister I. I. Klebanov, Foreign Minister I. S. Ivanov, Defense Minister I. D. Sergeyev, First Deputy Director of the Presidential Office D. A. Medvedev, Deputy Director of the Presidential Office S. E. Prukhodko, Minister of Education V. M. Filippov, General Director of the Federal Governmental Agency of Communications and Information (directly under the president) V. G. Matyukhin, chief delegate of the president of the Russian Federation to the Far East District K. B. Pulikovskiy, Governor of the Maritime Territory E. I. Nazdratenko, member of the State Duma of the Russian Federation Yu. M. Jong, and the Russian ambassador to the DPRK, V. I. Denisov.

3 Contrary to some news reports, the initiative for the visit originated in Russia. In late April 2000, the Kremlin used diplomatic channels to indicate to Pyongyang that if Kim Jong-il invited President Putin, he would accept the invitation and travel to the DPRK in the summer of 2000. Kim sent a hand-written invitation to Putin, and the Russian president said yes.

At Pyongyang Sunan Airport, General Secretary Kim Jong-il, together with high-ranking officials of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP), the DPRK government, and the Korean People's Army (KPA), warmly greeted the Russian leader.⁴ Tens of thousands of Pyongyang residents turned out at the airport with the flags of the two countries and bouquets in their hands to greet the guests from Russia.

Putin and Kim Jong-il had two rounds of summit talks at the Paekhwawon State Guesthouse in Pyongyang. At the talks, "both sides informed each other of the situation in their countries, had an exhaustive and in-depth exchange of opinions on further expanding and developing bilateral friendly and cooperative relations and a series of issues of mutual concern, and reached a consensus of views on all the matters discussed (KCNA 2000a)." Ministerial-level talks were also held between the two sides. Both sides discussed matters of mutual concern in such fields as foreign trade, economic cooperation, education, forestry, and military affairs. President Putin invited General Secretary Kim Jong-il to visit Russia at an appropriate time, and the invitation was accepted with gratitude.

After successfully completing the summit talks, the DPRK and Russia issued an 11-point joint declaration (KCNA 2000b), in which Pyongyang and Moscow vowed to strengthen the traditional relations of friendship, good-neighborliness, mutual trust, and multilateral cooperation.⁵ Describing the meeting and talks in Pyongyang as a "landmark event" in the history of friendly relations between the two countries, the KWP official newspaper, *Rodong Sinmun*, on 20 July 2000 said that "the declaration demonstrated each other's desire to strengthen the traditional relations of friendship, good-neighborliness, mutual trust, and multilateral cooperation and to make positive efforts for disarmament and global stability and security against all the policies of aggression and war." But, more important, President Putin was able to develop a good personal rapport with Kim Jong-il and referred to his counterpart as a very intelligent, pragmatic, and rational leader, "the man with whom one can deal."

4 The official DPRK delegation at the summit talks comprised Kim Yong-nam, president of the Presidium of the DPRK Supreme People's Assembly; Jo Myong-rok, director of the General Political Department of the KPA, who is also first vice-chairman of the DPRK National Defense Commission; Kim Yong-chun, chief of the General Staff of the KPA, who is also a member of the DPRK National Defense Commission; Kim Il-chol, minister of the People's Armed Forces, who is also vice-chairman of the DPRK National Defense Commission; Jon Pyong-ho, member of the DPRK National Defense Commission and secretary of the KWP Central Committee; Choe Thae-bok, chairman of the DPRK Supreme People's Assembly; Choe Yong-rim, prosecutor-general of the Central Public Prosecutor's Office; Kim Kuk-thae and Kim Yong-sun, secretaries of the KWP Central Committee; Paek Nam-sun, minister of foreign affairs; Pak Ui-chun, DPRK ambassador to Russia; and additional leading officials of party, armed forces, and power institutions, commissions and ministries of the cabinet, and national institutions.

5 In a symbolic gesture of reaffirmation of traditional Russian-North Korean friendship, on 20 July 2000, President Putin and General Secretary Kim Jong-il laid a wreath before the Liberation Tower and observed a moment of silence in memory of the soldiers of the Soviet army who had fallen in sacred battles for the liberation of Korea in August 1945.

Russia expressed its support for the North Korean position, stressing the need to resolve the question of Korean reunification independently by Koreans themselves in a peaceful and democratic manner. Moscow and Pyongyang reiterated the shared belief that the outside powers concerned should support but refrain from intervention in this process of Korean reconciliation. President Putin confirmed his support for the 15 June North-South Joint Declaration and promised to work toward ensuring a peaceful reunification of the divided peninsula. In their joint statement, the two leaders expressed their opposition to Washington's national missile defense plans and theater missile defense plans, saying that U.S. concerns about a possible threat from Pyongyang were "groundless." The joint declaration stated that the DPRK's missile program "does not pose any threat to anybody but is purely peaceful in its nature." Moreover, Kim Jong-il indicated to President Putin that the DPRK was willing to forfeit further development of its intercontinental ballistic missiles if the United States and other countries concerned were to agree to assist Pyongyang in its space exploration efforts and in its plans to launch two or three North Korean satellites per year at their expense. In a sense, in his conversations with Putin, the DPRK leader outlined a framework for a possible new deal between Pyongyang and Washington, which could settle the so-called North Korean missile question.

The Moscow Summit

Kim Jong-il made a return visit to Russia from 26 July to 18 August 2001, traveling more than 20,000 km in his personal armored train from the Russian-DPRK border at Khasan to St. Petersburg on the Baltic Sea and back. An official state visit in Moscow took place on 4–5 August 2001. This landmark journey⁶ dramatically improved Kim Jong-il's and the North Korean elite's perceptions of Russia, its new generation of reformist leaders, and its struggling peoples, as well as increased their understanding of Russian institutional reforms and socioeconomic and political changes unfolding in the country. The coverage of the visit in the world media lifted somewhat the dark veil over the personality of Kim Jong-il and considerably improved his image in the world.⁷ The fact that Kim (the "Dear Leader") felt confident enough to leave his country for a whole month and even celebrate its official

6 Kim Jong-il said that the purpose of the journey was "not to discuss the railway question, which is a technical problem for specialists to resolve," but to observe how the Russian Far East, Siberia, Moscow, and St. Petersburg have changed since his previous trip to what was then the Soviet Union, more than 40 years ago (Pulikovsky 2002, 47). Some experts also stress the symbolic significance of the train trip and its similarity with Kim Il-sung's six-week travel to the Soviet bloc in the summer of 1984. Kim Il-sung's 1984 rail trip is credited with launching a period of warmer relations and increased aid from Moscow in the mid-1980s. In the same vein, Kim Jong-il's rail trip in 2001 is credited with improving Russian-DPRK relations in the 2000s.

7 The best account of Kim Jong-il's visit to Russia in summer 2001 is Pulikovsky (2002). Konstantin Pulikovsky, plenipotentiary representative of the president of the Russian Federation to the Far Eastern District of Russia, was President Putin's personal envoy escorting Kim Jong-il on his train during his month-long journey across Russia.

Liberation Day of 15 August in a foreign land was further proof that he was firmly in control of his government, enjoyed total popular support, and did not fear opposition challenges while he was away.

Summit talks at the Kremlin on 4 August 2001 covered global politics and various bilateral relations in the Asia-Pacific, prospects for bilateral trade and military-technical cooperation, the question of linking the Trans-Korean railways (TKR) with the Trans-Siberian Railway (TSR), Russian commercial use of the port of Rajin, and many other important issues. In the end, President Putin and Chairman Kim Jong-il signed an eight-point joint declaration.

The Moscow Declaration stated the two countries' belief in the rule of international law, the principle of equality of states, and the leading role of the United Nations in world affairs. Against the background of escalating tensions in U.S.-DPRK relations caused by President George W. Bush's inclusion of North Korea in the so-called axis of evil in January 2001, the Moscow Declaration stressed the need to resolve international disputes by political means, through negotiations on the basis of nonconfrontation; and it underlined the right of every state to an "equal degree of security," regardless of its size or political system. Both sides agreed to join efforts to combat international terrorism and militant separatism. Pyongyang reiterated its support for Russia's position on the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty "as a cornerstone of strategic stability" in exchange for Russian welcome of the DPRK's position on its missile program, which "has peaceful character and does not pose a threat to any country that respects the sovereignty of the DPRK."

Moscow welcomed the North-South 15 June declaration and all related inter-Korean agreements, and promised to continue to play a "constructive and responsible role in positive processes on the Korean peninsula." Both sides warned against any external obstructions to the process of inter-Korean reconciliation. A real breakthrough for Pyongyang was Moscow's unexpected expression of understanding for the clarification of the DPRK's official position on the U.S. military presence in Korea, namely that "the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from South Korea is an urgent problem that must be resolved without delay in the interests of maintaining peace and security on the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia" (paragraph eight). Russia stressed the need to provide for peace and security on the peninsula by "nonmilitary means." The declaration did not mention the nuclear question, which was supposed to have been resolved by the U.S.-DPRK implementation of the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework. Russia welcomed the process of normalization of relations between the DPRK and the United States and Japan.

As for the future of bilateral relations, the Moscow Declaration emphasized the "deep historical roots of traditional Korean-Russian relations of friendship and cooperation" (paragraph three) and highlighted significant progress made in resolving a number of pressing bilateral economic problems, including Pyongyang's official recognition of its past debts to the former Soviet Union, the desirability of third-party (in other words, ROK) financing

of certain joint projects involving the reconstruction and modernization of the old Soviet-built electric power stations in the North, and, finally, the principle of mutual profitability during the construction of the TKR-TSR railway transport corridor connecting South Korea, North Korea, Russia, and Europe.

In sum, when Kim Jong-il was commenting in private on the significance of the Moscow Declaration, he reportedly said, “These days, people like to talk about ‘partnerships,’ ‘strategic partnerships,’ and so on. Foreign news media noticed that there was no reference to ‘strategic partnership’ between us. But I told President Putin that we did not need to come up with any term of that kind, because all that was about diplomacy, whereas what we needed was sincerity. And he agreed with me. I do not want to be a ‘partner,’ because between friends we do not call each other ‘partners’ (Pulikovsky 2002, 41–2).”

Moreover, when Kim Jong-il was passing through Moscow on his way back from St. Petersburg to the North, President Putin unexpectedly invited him for a last-minute lunch at his private residence at the Kremlin, on 8 August 2001. That private lunch with Putin’s family reportedly made quite a difference in further improving Kim Jong-il’s perceptions of Russia and its young, innovative leader. What both leaders had in common was the desire to build a powerful and prosperous nation for their respective peoples in a rather hostile international environment. They developed a great deal of personal chemistry, mutual respect, and understanding. Some even say that they became “true friends.” Kim Jong-il summed it up as follows: “When people treat me in a diplomatic fashion, I become a diplomat myself. In contrast, Putin was very straightforward with me, and I opened my soul to him (Pulikovsky 2002, 46).” In general, the Dear Leader was very satisfied with the journey, which definitely cleared up many misunderstandings and misperceptions about Russia and its policies in his mind.

Some Russian analysts believe that the wealth of information gathered and lessons learned by Kim Jong-il and his entourage during his first journey across Russia provided the foundation for the July 2002 policy decisions announced in Pyongyang, such as partial liberalization of prices and wages, marketization of services and utilities, introduction of partial convertibility of the *won* currency, and relaxation of labor-market controls. They interpreted those “economic improvement measures” emanating from Pyongyang not as the initiation of Chinese-style market-oriented reforms but as the North Korean government’s attempt to make a quantum leap from the Brezhnev-style redistributational socialism of the 1970s to the Gorbachev-style perestroika of the late 1980s–early 1990s in the former Soviet Union (Alexeyev 2002). Although North Koreans continued to view the Gorbachev period in Soviet history with a great deal of negativity, Russians began to regard Kim Jong-il as the North Korean statesman-reformer, much like Mikhail Gorbachev.

The Vladivostok Summit

On 20–24 August 2002, Kim Jong-il again traveled by train around the Russian Far East,⁸ specifically to the cities of Khabarovsk and Komsomolsk-upon-Amur. On 23 August 2003, he held a third summit meeting and had a private dinner with President Putin in Vladivostok.⁹

During his second visit to Russia, Kim Jong-il met many Russian provincial and local government officials, private businesspeople, and defense industry managers; he was very interested in further studying the positive and negative sides of ongoing Russian economic and political reforms. He paid special attention to the so-called Russian model of transition toward market economy, defense industry conversion, and market adjustments in the Russian military-industrial complex. Russian analysts believe that in 2004 the DPRK government will continue the country's economic reforms, especially in its military-industrial complex, following some of the lessons learned during Kim's 2002 trip to the Russian Far East.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the Dear Leader may have played a Russian card again. By postponing his scheduled PRC trip and inserting instead an unplanned visit to the Russian Far East in his "busy calendar" at the last minute, the Dear Leader may have tried to demonstrate to the PRC, considered by many the main sponsor of the DPRK in the international arena, that Pyongyang does have a Russian alternative. The intent may have been to put in doubt any exclusive status for Beijing in Korean affairs and, perhaps, to push Beijing to increase its economic assistance to North Korea and to intensify its political support for Pyongyang to counter worsening DPRK-U.S. relations. Bearing in mind President Putin's words at a news conference after the summit that "Russia must build the TKR for the simple reason that if it does not, then our dear friend China would do it," one may speculate that Kim Jong-il may have attempted to stimulate traditional Russian-Chinese contradictions on the Korean peninsula by playing Russia off against China on the railway issue.

At the summit, President Putin is said to have assured Kim Jong-il that Moscow would not support any U.S. efforts to impose a so-called Iraqi scenario on its North Korean neighbor, and that Russia would not join any anti-DPRK international coalition. Moreover, Russia would try to help the DPRK distance itself from the so-called axis of evil and extricate itself from its U.S.-

8 During his 2002 journey to Russia, Kim Jong-il was accompanied by Kim Yong-chun, a member of the National Defense Commission (NDC) and chief of the general staff of the KPA; Yon Hyong-muk, member of the NDC; Kim Yong-sun, secretary of the KWP Central Committee; Kang Sok-ju, first vice minister of foreign affairs; Pak Nam-gi, chairman of the State Planning Commission; Kim Yong-sam, minister of railways; and Jang Song-thaek and Ju Kyu-chang, first vice department directors of the KWP Central Committee.

9 The summit idea was discussed and agreed upon during the visit of the Russian foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, to Pyongyang on 29 July 2002. Kim Jong-il held talks with Ivanov for several hours, during which he described in great detail the economic reforms unfolding in the DPRK. They also exchanged views on outstanding issues of regional security and of bilateral concern (Alexeyev 2002).

sponsored international isolation. Further, the Vladivostok summit allowed Kim Jong-il to regain the initiative in inter-Korean relations—an initiative that was frozen as a result of the June 2002 naval clashes in the Yellow Sea—and to revive the discussions about the railway reconnection project. Moreover, President Putin is rumored to have encouraged Kim Jong-il to invite Prime Minister Koizumi of Japan to Pyongyang and make necessary concessions in order to normalize the DPRK-Japanese relations for the sake of future prosperity of the North Korean people and peace and stability in North-east Asia.

Kim Jong-il's second Russia trip cemented propitious conditions for an unprecedented upswing in DPRK-Russian interstate and political relations. Even during the decades of fraternal friendship that was based on socialist internationalism, North Korean and Soviet leaders did not enjoy the high degree of interpersonal trust and credibility that President Putin and Chairman Kim appear to share these days.

The North Korean leader currently demonstrates a marked warmth and a special attentiveness to Russia. Since the beginning of 2003, he has frequently met with the Russian ambassador, Andrei A. Karlov, in a very cordial atmosphere¹⁰ and has held more than a dozen prolonged conversations with high-ranking officials from Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including Deputy Foreign Minister Losyukov and senior diplomats at the Russian embassy in Pyongyang. The North Korean leaders appreciate the fact that President Putin alone continues to communicate personally and deal with them directly on the basis of equality, sincerity, and mutual respect, despite the increasing anti-DPRK international campaign sponsored by the United States to fight "rogue states" and other members of the axis of evil.

At long last, the North Korean leaders seem to have grasped new Russian realities and realize that their country and people actually have more in common with Russia and Russians than is usually believed. North Korean-style socialism was an offspring of the Soviet Stalinist model. The North Korean and Russian elites share a common genesis. The mentality of the two peoples was formed within the same Soviet socialist paradigm and evolved along similar lines during the period of mutually reliant socialist construction. As part and parcel of the Soviet-centric world, they used to share the values, benefits, problems, and deficiencies of the same Soviet socialist civilization. All these developmental similarities make it easier for the North Korean elites to understand where Russia is coming from, why things evolve the way they do there, and what the future might hold for them. At the same time, they offer useful insights to Pyongyang as to how it can approach various new developmental challenges on its own road to economic restructuring and political liberalization. For North Korea, Russia serves as a role model of

¹⁰ These repeated visits by Kim Jong-il to the Russian embassy are noted because it is highly unusual for the head of state to frequent a foreign embassy so often.

sorts and a window into modern civilization. It offers an example of what may actually happen in the North should that country seriously embark on a road of internal reformation.

Now Pyongyang seems to be willing to maintain stable and intimate dialogue at the highest possible level with Moscow. In turn, Moscow, too, values a close bilateral relationship with its North Korean neighbor and is reluctant to jeopardize it for the sake of unproved multilateral formulas. A high degree of interpersonal trust and intense political dialogue allow Russia to not only obtain credible information about the latest developments on the Korean peninsula from the North Korean leaders themselves, but also open the possibility for Moscow to influence these events as they unfold and nudge Pyongyang in the direction of further socioeconomic and political reforms at home and more constructive behavior abroad.

Russian Views on the North Korean Question

The Russian government seems to assume that, following the historic inter-Korean summit on 15 June 2000, the slow-moving process of Korean reintegration has already begun. It is rather unstable and erratic because of frequent fluctuations in North Korea's security position, financial difficulties, political squabbling inside the ROK, and a U.S. policy seemingly designed to slow Korean reunification (President of Russia 2003, 5, 8). The two Koreas are on their way to formal political unification, however, and the process is likely only to accelerate in the years to come.

To position itself in a way that would enable it to benefit from its friendly and close relationship with the first leader of a unified Korea, Russia strives to keep up the reunification momentum by creating a proper balance in its individual relations with Seoul and Pyongyang; by mediating inter-Korean differences; and by hampering the further development of the Korean processes in accordance with the perceived U.S. scenario, thereby reducing the possibility of the expansion of the U.S. military presence on the peninsula and its redeployment closer to the Russian Far Eastern borders (President of Russia 2003, 8).

Many Korea experts in Russia tend to dismiss U.S. moralizing regarding Kim Jong-il's regime.¹¹ They praise the acceleration of the North Korean reforms and encourage more assistance and support from South Korea. Most Russians understand that the Dear Leader's regime is totalitarian in nature, and they do not particularly like it because they had their own terrible historical experience with Stalinist totalitarianism. Russia, however, is against any regime change through foreign intervention or export of democratic revolution to North Korea. The ongoing economic liberalization and political

11 Experts include Vadim Tkachenko, director of the Center for Korean Research at the Institute of the Far East of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and Alexander Vorontsov, head of the Korea section at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

decompression in Pyongyang are likely to gradually soften up the regime beyond recognition, and, with time, the Kim clan is sure to pass away from the historical scene, thereby opening the gates for Korean unification. That process must unfold naturally, without foreign military intervention (Arbatov 2003).

On the other hand, many believe that the U.S. hard-line policy and adamant insistence on North Korea's unconditional unilateral nuclear disarmament fortifies the siege mentality in Pyongyang and only strengthens Kim Jong-il's regime. Intensified international hostility around the DPRK simply allows the DPRK government to impose harsher security measures on the society, puts the KPA on the center stage of domestic politics at the expense of other social and political forces, drains productive resources from economic reform and development, and increases popular support for and the domestic legitimacy of Kim Jong-il (Titarenko 2003).

In what is reminiscent of the Cold War mentality, quite a few analysts contend that the United States purposefully exaggerates the North Korean nuclear threat because of the "U.S. permanent interest in aggravating tensions on the Korean peninsula" in order to justify its long-term military presence in Korea and East Asia as a whole (Titarenko 2003). They believe that the North Korean nuclear crisis is not about nuclear nonproliferation; neither is it really a security crisis between Pyongyang and Washington. Instead, it is a great diplomatic game between Washington and Beijing, with huge stakes, and played for long-term strategic control and dominance over the entire Korean peninsula as well as the future shape of the East Asian security order. In other words, the question is not whether the United States will fight a war against North Korea over a couple of dubious nuclear warheads but, instead, whether the United States will choose to engage in a major conflict with a 1.3-billion-strong China that is rapidly emerging as the second superpower and potential primary challenger to U.S. global supremacy over strategic preeminence in Korea. It is also a question about what the historical consequences of such a mega-confrontation between the two Asia-Pacific giants could be for the security situation in the whole of East Asia (Bubnov 2003).

Some Russian military experts believe that, in contrast with Iraq or Yugoslavia, the United States lacks fundamental economic or political interest in initiating a major war in Korea. There is no oil in the DPRK—it is poor, hungry, and underdeveloped (in the military experts' words, "there is nothing to plunder in the North"), and, despite its official label of a "terror-sponsoring nation," Pyongyang is not known for extremist Muslim connections. Besides, Washington may not want to have any serious trouble with Beijing at present (Gareyev 2003). In addition, Russian experts consider Pyongyang's suspected nuclear arsenal and artillery forces located near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) as sufficient military deterrents, able to prevent a U.S. military attack against North Korea (Safranchuk 2003; Konovalov 2003).

Precision strikes from offshore bases alone are unlikely to resolve the Korean crisis, and Washington is clearly not interested in any protracted, large-scale military conflict on the peninsula (Titarenko 2003). Moreover, seeming U.S. failure in rebuilding postwar Iraq puts a damper on more aggressive U.S. plans in Korea (Rogov 2003).

However, other military analysts argue that, if the Bush administration were to decide to attack the North preemptively, it would be mostly for domestic reasons and causes unrelated to the Korean peninsula. In that case, Washington is not going to ask anyone's permission, including the United Nations, the ROK, Russia, or even China, and is likely to strike first when U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ), and augmentation forces are militarily and logistically ready for a major sustainable offensive operation. In their opinion, U.S. war planners are not afraid of Kim Jong-il's imaginary nuclear deterrent or of his rusting long-range artillery tubes. They are likely to carpet bomb everything from nuclear facilities to Kim Jong-il's palaces, as they did in Iraq, and then parachute the ROK's special forces into all major North Korean cities and key installations in order to reunite the country from within (Vladimirov 2003). Given all these expert opinions that by and large allow for the possibility of war in Korea, it is no wonder that, in mid-August 2003, the Russian General Staff and Pacific Command conducted large-scale joint civilian and military exercises designed to, among many other things, test the Russian operational response to the possibility of the outbreak of hostilities on the Korean peninsula in light of the escalating DPRK-U.S. confrontation (Kravchenko 2003; Pulikovskiy 2003).

Whatever happens on the Korean peninsula in the immediate future and in the years to come, it is clear that Russia's national security interests and its economic and political interests will be directly affected. Therefore, the Russian government is sure to continue its active, balanced engagement policy with both Korean states through separate bilateral channels; within various multilateral frameworks, including the six-party talks; and in cooperation with third parties, especially China.

Prospects for Multilateral Conflict Resolution on the Korean Peninsula

Russia half-heartedly endorsed the Geneva talks, the four-party peace talks, and the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) mission in the DPRK throughout the 1990s; expressed conditional diplomatic support for the three-party peace talks in Beijing in April 2003 (Losyukov 2003); and is actively participating in the six-party North Korean crisis-resolution process.¹² Russia's goal in the Beijing process is to be an honest broker

¹² Participants in the four-party talks were China, North Korea, South Korea, and the United States. Participants in the three-party talks were China, North Korea, and the United States. Participants in the six-party talks are China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States.

that strives to achieve denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, obtain credible assurances of mutual nonaggression and confidence-building measures across the DMZ, and advance better governance based on democratic values and free markets in North Korea.

Most experts in Russia are relatively pessimistic, however, about the prospects for the six-party talks. They tend to predict a troublesome continuation of the existing status quo, which will be shaken up sporadically by emotional walkouts and abrupt terminations. The status quo may be occasionally adjusted at the margins during the on-again, off-again rounds of six-party plenary sessions devoted to endless debates about the virtues, flaws, costs, benefits, and credibility of something like an Agreed Framework Lite or Very Lite, an Agreed Framework Two (stipulating North Korean nuclear disarmament in exchange for multilateral security guarantees and international economic assistance), an Agreement to Disagree, or even an Agreement on Working Groups. These experts expect such talks to head slowly toward an unannounced death—like the notorious four-party peace talks of 1997–99.

At worst, Russians who specialize in Korean affairs predict a dramatic failure for the Beijing six-party talks. In particular, these talks are believed to be a venue for both Washington and Pyongyang to buy time for further advancement of their respective sinister aggressive plans against each other as well as an opportunity to delegitimize each other in the eyes of the international community of nations: “See, we told you so. . . . We made concessions time and again, but they just refused to listen and compromise. . . .” At the end of the day, these experts expect that the United States may succeed in fully delegitimizing the North Korean regime in front of other participants in the six-party talks, especially its Chinese Communist ally.

Consequently, they believe that Washington may try to use the talks to form an ad hoc, multilateral, anti-DPRK coercive coalition of the intimidated (the ROK and the PRC), the weak (Russia), and the greedy (Japan) and may attempt to bring down the North Korean regime by intensifying blockades, increasing international pressure, and using force if necessary to resolve the North Korean security crisis once and for all. They urge the Russian government to stay ahead of the game in order to prevent such an eventuality.

In general, Russian government officials are frustrated with the dramatic shift toward belligerence in U.S. policy toward the DPRK. They argue that Pyongyang largely abided by its obligations under the Agreed Framework and is receiving the short end of the stick, which, ironically, confirms their long-held belief that Washington was never serious about providing Pyongyang with alternative sources of nuclear power for peaceful use. Washington’s arbitrary decision to not certify Pyongyang’s compliance with the Agreed Framework is interpreted as a manifestation of a growing U.S. tendency in international affairs toward unilateral rejectionism and increasing reliance on the use of force instead of the rule of law. Moscow does not

really share the U.S. concerns over the North Korean missile and nuclear weapons programs. Furthermore, Russian officials believe that the U.S. designation of the DPRK as part of an axis of evil, despite clear evidence of positive domestic evolution in the North in recent years, may seriously undermine the efficacy of President Roh Moo-hyun's peace and prosperity policy and prospects for peace, stability, and inter-Korean reconciliation on the peninsula. Thus, without naming names, Moscow unambiguously holds Washington responsible for the current absence of dialogue and escalation of tension between Washington and Pyongyang.

It is clear that the Russian government will not support any attempt by the North Korean leaders to blackmail Seoul through threatened military aggression; that would be counterproductive and hinder Russia's expanding national interests in the South. Neither will Moscow encourage any kind of head-to-head challenge by Pyongyang against Washington because Moscow understands the devastating consequences that would result for the North and the highly destabilizing impact such a challenge would be for all of Northeast Asia.

It is also evident, however, that Russia will be receptive to Kim Jong-il's personal overtures and pleas for political, diplomatic, and military-technical support and, possibly, even expanded economic assistance. Moscow is committed to providing enough spare parts for defensive weapons to Pyongyang to ensure the North Korean regime's self-defense sufficiency and the restoration of the North's credible military deterrent capability on the peninsula. It goes without saying that Russia will not support any kind of international coalition that has as its goal the military crushing of North Korea.

If the international community succeeds in reaching a new "grand bargain" with the DPRK at the negotiation table in the ongoing six-party talks in Beijing—and this is a big "if"—there will be practical limits to Russian participation in any such scheme. Moscow may be willing to participate in offering some vague multilateral security assurances to Pyongyang and in implementing the international inspection and verification regimes to be created to verify and monitor the North Korean compliance with its future nuclear disarmament obligations. The Russian role in the DPRK's economic rehabilitation as part of a new package deal is likely to be very limited, however. Substantive and mutually beneficial railroad cooperation, energy cooperation, enterprise rehabilitation cooperation, and debt relief cooperation are all myths for now. At present, many obstacles (domestic and international, economic, financial, and political) to these cooperative bilateral or multilateral projects are too high, stakes are too low, and payoffs are delayed too far into the future, making Russian interests just too marginal. Despite all the talk, Russians are not willing to walk the walk toward implementation any time soon. In sum, as far as Russia is concerned, there will be no Trans-Siberian Railway–Trans Korean railways connection, no Russian-

Korean gas/oil pipeline, no debt relief, and no more money thrown into the North Korean “money pit” until Korean reunification.

Moscow, however, is likely to continue its efforts to convince the North Korean leaders that domestic change is good; that change should not necessarily threaten the DPRK’s survival; and that the more open and market oriented the DPRK becomes, the more benefits the DPRK is likely to receive in terms of the advancement of its economy, social welfare, and national security. In this vein, Moscow will continue its policy of encouraging the North-South economic, cultural, and political exchanges by placing a greater emphasis on the need for the North to show more reciprocity and transparency in its relations with its dialogue partners from the South.

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