



KOREAN SECURITY AND UNIFICATION DILEMMAS: A RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE

By Georgy Toloraya

Abstract

Russia, one of the four important players in Korea, is focused on Korea due to its “turn to the East” policy. It is increasingly less interested in a momentous Korean unification under the ROK’s guidance which would result in a sudden shift of balance of power in the region. The nuclear issue is also less urgent now, while the goals of stability and peaceful dialogue, cooperation, and eventual reconciliation between the two Koreas are at the forefront.

A collapse of the DPRK, not impossible in principle, is not imminent. Pressure and isolation do not bring it any closer. The stand-off between the U.S. and Russia and the rivalry between the U.S. and China make it doubtful that the DPRK can be brought down peacefully in a “soft landing” scenario. The alternative is “conventionalizing” North Korea through evolutionary internal reforms—impossible in the absence of security guarantees. The resilience of the North Korean regime may prompt Seoul and Washington to take into consideration the interests of the Northern ruling class.

Russia can help implement such a policy in cooperation with the ROK and U.S. Recently, Russia-North Korean relations warmed up and many new economic projects are being discussed. Most important are the trilateral economic projects involving South Korea, such as railroads, which North Korea supports.

The first step might be for South Korea to lift sanctions and increase engagement efforts. Denuclearization of North Korea is possible only in the distant future and should not be a stumbling block for dialogue. Such a dialogue (including a multilateral one) should guarantee a freeze on the North Korean nuclear program and step-by-step dismantling of it, hedging against the risk of change in strategic balance and proliferation.

Key words: *Russian policy in Korea; Korea unification; North Korea; nuclear problem; trilateral projects*

Introduction

The Korean issue remains a long-term concern for Russia, especially now that the “turn to the East” was declared as the most important innovative feature of Russian policy in the second decade of 21st century. Russia remains at stake in Korean unification and security issues—generally considered to hold 4th place after the United States, China, and Japan. However, some influential Russian experts¹ argue that Russia holds 3rd place, ahead of Japan, claiming that Japan abstains from using its ability to influence the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

This paper concentrates on Russia’s position on inter-Korean relations and its attitude towards the modalities and prospects of a possible Korean unification. Our first question is what are Russia’s real – not declaratory – interests in Korean unification and its capabilities of promoting or discouraging it? Is it true that Russian interests in Korea are scarce? The Russian factor in Korean affairs has largely been neglected after the break up of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, Russia was supposed to follow the U.S. lead in pressuring North Korea on the nuclear issue. When this did not happen, it was perceived as a deviation, a breach of trust on Russia’s part, not a manifestation of an independent policy by Moscow. It was also taken for granted that Russia would support a South-led unification, essentially absorption of North Korea by the South. After all, the logic went, such an event would lead to the disappearance of a hotbed of tension near the Russian border and would result in the emergence of a new powerful partner, led by economic cooperation, and a unified Korea.

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These assessments changed with the advent of the crisis in Ukraine, which clearly showed the geopolitical divide between Russia and the West. That historic shift made Russia's policy makers re-assess priorities. The rebalancing of foreign policy is underway with a greater accent on relations with China and other non-Western powers. In Asia and the Pacific, there is an obvious tilt towards containing the United States and its allies in Asia, as European dimension is in such a sorrowful state for Russia.

Korean unification under ROK guidance – and no other is imaginable at the moment – would result in a sudden shift of balance of power in the Far East. It would mean a revision of the results of the Second World War, upon which the global system has been based for over 70 years, and a possible change for the worse regarding security surroundings for China. This all might be detrimental to Russia's interests. A unified Korea, even with the unlikely event of a U.S. troop withdrawal, would still remain an ally of the United States and one with much more power (for example, territorial claims to China and even Russia cannot be excluded).

Therefore, Russia's policy goal in Korea is to maintain the existing security structure for stability. That means preventing any sudden changes associated with unification or a serious setback in North Korea's security positions. Any emergencies or a collapse scenario in this nuclear-armed state are highly undesirable.

What then are the possible areas of Russia's cooperation with the regional partners - including the U.S., ROK, and Japan? After all, the situation on the Korean Peninsula remains one of the few international issues where Russia and the United States cooperate, as noted by President Putin himself.²

Russia's Policy to Promote Inter-Korean Relations

Russian influence on Korean affairs is often neglected, or the improvement of relations with DPRK is lately mocked as a "union of outcasts." However, lately Russia's national interests include stability in this neighboring area and promotion of mutually beneficial economic projects. Now that Russia's global policies are determined by growing confrontation with the West, its desire to advance in Asia and the Pacific both economically and politically—which has been quite obvious in the last several years—became even more pronounced. Northeast Asia, closest to Russian borders and home for the three most important economies of Asia as well as leading Russia's political and economic partners, is pivotal for Russia's deeper involvement into Asia. The Korean Peninsula in this context is the key to Asia.

Russia recognizes that the goal of DPRK denuclearization is hardly attainable for the moment. So any diplomatic process is only a tool to hedge the risks, stop North Korea from improving its arsenal, and prevent nuclear proliferation. At the same time, the non-proliferation issue cannot be suitably solved without addressing broader security issues.

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Potential reforms in the neighboring country would constitute a chance for Moscow to improve its positions in Northeast Asia and contribute to implementation of economic projects, which would then help stabilize DPRK's economic situation.

In 2014-2015, Russian leverage on North Korea was consistently growing as relations improved, mostly by North Korean initiative. Confrontation with the West suddenly brought both countries closer together: North Korea stresses, especially in contacts by the military, a “common threat.” Moreover, North Korea deserves attention since it has regrettably become one of the few public supporters of Russia on the Ukrainian issue.

It should be noted that the current upsurge in bilateral relations happened mostly as a result of Pyongyang's sudden preparedness to answer Moscow's overtures. Russia in fact started to implement the doctrine of “standing on both legs” on the Korean Peninsula since the early 2000s. It was then that the basic agreements between Putin and Kim Jong-il were reached which bear fruit today (the issues of debt problem solution, trilateral projects, logistics development can all be found in the 2000 and 2001 summit declarations). The process stagnated because of the North's nuclear tests when Russia reluctantly joined international sanctions, but the Medvedev-Kim Jong-il summit in 2011 (symbolically the last meeting with a foreign head of state for the late North Korean leader) reinvigorated it. Kim's death and the process of power transition in Pyongyang delayed the process. However, when Russian experts concluded that the Kim Jong-un regime was stable enough to deal with, negotiations on several major economic projects and political



consultations between the DPRK and Russia started—at North Korea’s prompting.

The most obvious and widely discussed reason for North Korea to reach out to Russia was to move away from overdependence on China. When Xi went to Seoul first and “chose South” instead of North, Pyongyang became openly critical towards Beijing and turned to Russia. There was a flurry of bilateral visits in 2014 and early 2015, mostly devoted to economic projects. Several high-profile political visits to Russia took place all within a year: Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong, “Second in command” Secretary Choe Ryong Hae, Vice Prime-Minister Ro Du Chol, and Minister of Defence Hyon Yong Chol (his purge is hardly related to his meetings in Russia, as they were rather symbolic). Russian Vice-Premier Yu Trutnev and Minister of Far East Development Alexander Galushka also visited Pyongyang.

In April 2015, the 7th session of the Intergovernmental Commission took place in Pyongyang. A “Year of Friendship” was officially inaugurated on April 14th (to last until October 2015, when a closing ceremony is to be held in Pyongyang). The plan provided for increased delegation exchange—such as visits of Russia’s Federation Council Chairman and Vice-Premier to Pyongyang and reciprocal visits of their Korean counterparts. A special plan of cultural events was adopted, comprising visits of sister cities delegations, numerous sport exchanges, exchanges in educational sphere, delegations of scientists (including that of social scientists from DPRK, which is noteworthy), and increase in tourism. Special “Weeks of Friendship” will take place. More than a dozen treaties and agreements are planned for signing within this period.

Although the expected visit of Kim Jong-un to Russia did not materialize, the trend to work out the broad long-term basis of economic cooperation continues. In 2014-2015, negotiations on different economic projects for government and business were of a scale unprecedented for the last three decades. Bilateral economic cooperation negotiations between Russia and North Korea have seemingly reached the same level as after the remarkable Kim Il-sung visit to the USSR in 1984. The previous upsurge bore some fruit: new “compensation,” procession-on-commission projects (when Russia supplied equipment and raw materials getting ready-made goods as a compensation), re-orientation of North Korean exports towards the USSR, feasibility studies for nuclear power plants and other grand-scale projects. It was short-lived, however. Increasing difficulties for the Soviet economy put a cap on cooperation after trade (including

economic assistance) and peaked in 1987 at 1.4 billion rubles (the equivalent of about \$2.7 billion) taking into consideration then prices and rate of exchange). After this, trade and investment fell to almost zero in the 1990s. The short period between 2000-2002 saw some revival of commerce as a result of the political rapprochement but the liberal-minded Russian economic establishment came close to sabotaging politically motivated arrangements, reluctant to deal with the “doomed regime” and waste money on aid to it. Negotiations on debt repayment started immediately after meetings between Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-il in 2000-2001, but dragged for a decade.

Is the situation we are currently witnessing different? How much aid can Russia possibly provide? Is there any form of mutually beneficial trade possible for the two countries? Can negotiations result in a real increase in trade (the target is \$1 billion by 2020: half the peak level of the 1980s)? Official statistics put Russia-DPRK trade below \$100 million per year, and last year this dropped to \$92 million, with a further drop in the early months of 2015. However, this does not include shipments via third countries, which are sometimes quite significant. Nevertheless it is true that such “uncentralized” (at least, on the Russian side) economic cooperation is unlikely to be on any sizable scale, because businessmen tend to avoid the uncertainties and limitations on financial transactions involved in dealing with heavily sanctioned North Korea. In October 2014 the two countries agreed on settling the accounts in rubles, without the involvement of U.S. banks or U.S. dollars. Business transactions between North Korea and Russia had reached 3.5 billion rubles (\$67 million) in value by April.

A new cooperation concept seems to be emerging from the Russian leadership’s increased attention to the DPRK. Russia’s overall approach is very pragmatic: Anything the North Koreans want they should pay for, and in advance. North Korea’s most valuable resources are minerals and raw materials, and these have been at the center of most deals. The second pillar of Russian strategy – to attract South Korean capital into trilateral projects – could really become a game-changer in regional cooperation.

The creation of infrastructure for economic cooperation is now underway. Both countries have agreed to appoint “project commissioners” who will work to reduce red tape and streamline business interactions, acting as “unique points of contact” for strategic projects. For the first time, a Russia-North Korea business council has been created to find solutions to the problems of visa issuance and developing better communications. Lately



many bilateral agreements and framework memoranda of understanding have been agreed upon, ranging from automobile transportation to sanitary control of agricultural products, from debt repayment and agreements on settling accounts in rubles to the new rules regarding North Korean workers. Unlike in the past, sectoral meetings have become regular, and there are now several dozen tracks of government-to-government, business-to-government, as well as business-to-business negotiations.

During the above-mentioned intergovernmental session in Pyongyang, attended by 60 Russian delegates, 25 working groups discussed different avenues for potential cooperation. In fact, the grand overall program of cooperation was agreed upon, based on years of feasibility studies. The North Korean side suggested many barter operations given the lack of financial resources at its disposal, with interest by some Russian companies (like coal in exchange for pig iron, etc). Many of the projects are based on modernization of plants and facilities, created in cooperation with the former Soviet Union. New projects are also under discussion. The North Koreans are especially interested in getting a supply of energy from the Russian Far East and are ready to pay in copper from Onsan deposits. Russian companies expressed interest in revitalizing North Korea's hydro and coal fired power plants and agreed to set up a special working group to study the issue of electricity supply to the Korean Peninsula, including an analysis of possible route supplies of fuel and energy balances of the participating countries and the cost of electricity. In addition, wind generators may be supplied to North Korea. Russian companies are interested in getting magnesite and developing mineral deposits. It is agreed that Russian geologists would conduct a survey of mineral resources in the DPRK, based on the materials which were accumulated during decades of Russia-DPRK cooperation. The DPRK is interested in exporting agricultural and fishery products.

Both sides agreed on cooperation in the special economic zones of the two countries (they are called Territories of Priority Development in the Far East) and will probably create a trilateral zone with participation from the two Koreas. The DPRK is interested in Russian investment in the Wonsan-Kumgansan tourist zone.

While Russia and North Korea have in principle found the balance between North Korea's desire to get aid and Russia's intention to get profit, the agreements that have already been reached are very hard to implement. Despite the *de facto* advance of a

market economy of sorts in North Korea, Russian businessmen are experiencing the same old hurdles, familiar after decades of cooperation under the Soviet Union: short-term pursuit of individual gain, unilateral modifications of agreements, the introduction of new rules (sometimes retroactive) unfavorable to investors, breach of obligations, and late delivery. Decision-making mechanisms in North Korea are still opaque, despite promises by the North Koreans to let Russians get acquainted with legal regulations, previously inaccessible to foreigners (which made it easy for North Koreans to present their decisions as based on internal law). However, in practice, even this does not help much. Decisions are often based on the spontaneous impulses of higher authorities that cannot be contacted for explanations, and there is general lack of coordination between different branches of the state system and economic organizations. Problems with communication persist.

Joining Hands with South Korea?

What can the above-mentioned increase in Russia-North Korean cooperation bring to improve inter-Korean relations? Can it prepare for an eventual unification? As far as Moscow is concerned, potential three-party projects attracting South Korean investment into North Korea via Russia are the most promising venture. They can bring much-needed financing, provide markets for Russia and North Korea in the South, and vice versa. Such projects are also important geopolitically and geoeconomically for promoting regional peace and cooperation in Northeast Asia. They are seen both as a source of mutual prosperity and as a tool to help the North Korean economy modernize, as well as a way to build mutual trust and improve the political atmosphere.

This concept was proposed by Russian policy makers in the 1990s. Despite the common misperception, North Korea has always been in favor of such projects, and it is well documented in Russia-DPRK bilateral dealings. North Koreans essentially say "we do not care where you get the money for the projects in our land." Russia has tried to solicit the support of the Park government—viewed in Russia as more pragmatic and less extremist than the previous administration—and gained moderate success during the 2013 Russia-ROK summit in Seoul, when President Park agreed to South Korean participation in the Khasan-Rajin railroad project. Especially now, when a new course for establishing free economic zones has been declared by the North with great fanfare, North Koreans are more than eager to use Russian offices to get South



Korean investments. For example, the Basic Element company recently expressed its interest in trilateral projects. South Korean state corporation K-Water is engaged with Russia's RusHydro state company on possible cooperation in North Korea. K-Water has discussed various issues with RusHydro, including water resource investigation, flood prevention, hydro-electric generation, and renewable energy. The creation of a common electrical grid for the three countries for exporting Russian energy is not out of question.

The Trans-Korea Railway/Trans-Siberian Railway (TKR-TSR) project is now a priority for the Russian railroad company, although it was hotly debated in the early 2000s. Russia had to unilaterally invest into the pilot project linking its border with North Korea's Rajin port. It is worth noting that Russia and North Korea see it as a pilot project for a future Trans-Korean railroad connecting to the Trans-Siberian line (as stated in the Moscow Summit Declaration of 2001). The Russia-DPRK joint venture Rasoncontrans was created in 2009 and work at the Khasan-Rajin route started in October 2008, when the agreement was signed between the DPRK Ministry of Railroads and Russia's RZhD state company. As a result, 54 km of railroad were rebuilt, 18 bridges and three tunnels were constructed. The universal terminal in Rajin port is also being constructed, with the potential for four million tons of cargo passing through it. The first test run of the trains was undertaken in October 2011, and in September 2013 the railroad was officially opened. Since 2014, Korean companies such as Posco, Hyundai Merchant Marine Co. and Korea Railroad Corporation have started to study the feasibility of participating in the construction of railways, ports, and harbors associated with this project. In 2014, 100,000 tons of coal were transported via Rajin, and another 100,000 tons are contracted for shipping in 2015. The second shipment of Russian coal will be sent from the DPRK's Rajin port to Pohang. The Koreans agreed to provide capacity for transportation of five million tons of cargo on the Khasan-Rajin route.

Other trilateral projects not in the limelight are also important. The power line connecting the Russian Far East, where excessive electricity generation capacity for export exists, with South Korea as an export market has been discussed for many years. In 2009, a number of agreements between Russian Inter RAO UES and South Korea's Korea Electric Power Corporation (KEPCO) were signed. Because of deterioration in the relations between North and South Korea, this project was shelved. However, Russia remains committed to the project and has been discussing it recently on a bilateral basis. Russian Minister of Far

East Alexander Galushka, after visiting North Korea in October 2014, announced that the DPRK had agreed to build an energy bridge from Russia to South Korea. Russian energy company RAO Energy System of East is looking to develop a feasibility study on delivering power to North Korea's Rason region. The short-term plan was to deliver 200 megawatts (MW) of power to Rason by 2016, with demand in the region expected to triple to 600 MW by 2025.

Of most significance is the fate of the gas pipeline project, which was agreed to at the summit level between Russia and North Korea in 2011. It was to become a real game-changer since the pipeline enhances the energy security of South Korea and brings North Korea benefits without any concessions or dangers associated with "opening." The project has been pursued since 2003 (when the Russian Gazprom state company and South Korean KOGAS signed a cooperation agreement). In September 2011, the "roadmap" was signed for construction (an investment of \$2.5 billion will be needed, supplying a volume of 12 billion cubic meters per year). The gas pipeline in Korea, because of external (the need to get a connection to the Asian gas market) and internal factors (the need to diversify production and exports as well as to use Gazprom's existing capacity to build pipelines), was one of the most important Russian economic undertakings in Asia and the Pacific. The project was also critical for Russia's Korea policy, as it fully corresponded with Moscow's desire to establish itself as a player on the peninsula. It would help promote inter-Korean cooperation, guarantee stability and assist the DPRK in improving its economic situation, as well as increase the North's chances for economic modernization.

However, the project became a political hostage, involving not only South and North Korea, but also the U.S. and China. A political decision by the South Korean government (Russia and the DPRK have already explicitly confirmed their readiness to implement this project) to approve the project was never made. Moreover, South Korean importers had insisted on "special terms" that were far from realistic (as if it was only Russia who needed the pipeline). Therefore, Gazprom is now building an LNG plant in the Far East, and has been losing interest in the overland pipeline. It is considering supplying the more expensive LNG to South Korea by sea rather than continue to engage in this tug-of-war over the pipeline.

Given the right political atmosphere, other trilateral and multilateral projects could be initiated. For example, South Korean investment could be used for modernizing—with the



use of Russian technology—industrial objects in the North once built with Soviet assistance such as metallurgy, building materials and mineral excavation. North Koreans are especially interested in modernizing the power plants. South Korean companies might also be interested in hiring North Korean workers at their assembly and other plants in Russia. Such a practice would be a valuable example of North-South cooperation in third countries without the limitations of the political realities on the Korean Peninsula, in addition to being commercially profitable.

The above considerations do not mean that Russia supports “perpetuation” of the division of Korea and would not like to see a change in North Korea. On the contrary, it is working on reducing tension and promoting peaceful dialogue, cooperation, and eventual reconciliation between the two Koreas. In the distant future that process might lead to economic integration and a creation of a unified state, passing through a number of stages. Russia hopes such a state would be neutral and not hostile to Russia.

However, at the moment Russia deems it desirable to preserve both countries’ statehood while promoting change in North Korea. But to start this process, Russia believes North Korea should have security guarantees for the existing regime, however bizarre and unpleasant it is. There are simply no better alternatives: it is the best of the bad options.

Regrettably, this is far from where events are leading. North Korea is under increasing pressure and finds itself more isolated than ever. Moreover, the main purpose of Kim Jong-un’s regime is to survive and therefore postpone any changes. The simultaneous deterioration of relations between Moscow and the West, rapprochement between Russia and the DPRK, and the wedge between DPRK and China created a window of opportunity for North Korea’s continued isolation. Some experts suggest the situation has become even more conducive to North Korea maintaining its old practices, including keeping South Korea at a distance.

This is an understandable reaction as inter-Korean relations have unfortunately remained unchanged for decades. The goals of the Korean War were not reached by any party, and each believes that only complete victory over the enemy and its capitulation can put it to end. North Koreans do have reason to believe that the “change of regime” concept and eventual disappearance of their statehood still remains the basis for the U.S.-South Korean vision of the fate of North Korea. The basic understanding of the situation in Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo remains much the

same as immediately following the fall of the communist system. At that time, the widespread belief was that the DPRK would soon follow suit of the European communist countries and be unified under Seoul’s rule. No one, including China, dared to oppose this process. These expectations turned out to be wrong; nevertheless, the anticipation of the “imminent collapse” of the DPRK as the prerequisite for unification of Korea has remained the mainstream view of South Korean and U.S. political thinking for the last quarter-century. During the current administration period these hopes in the South, to the view of an outside observer, might have even become stronger.

The author believes a collapse scenario is even less likely today than in the 1990s when North Korea suddenly lost much of its external support, plunged into an unprecedented economic crisis, and did not have any “nuclear deterrent.” Today the new geopolitical situation—including the above-mentioned stand-off between the U.S. and Russia as well as the rivalry (milder in magnitude, but greater in scope) between the U.S. and China—gives little hope for a possibility that the North Korean state can be brought down peacefully in a “soft landing” scenario and its territory taken by one of the competing “camps” in a serene manner.

What about unification then? Unfortunately, Koreans are not given a chance to solve their problems by themselves. Korea may yet again become a flashpoint of a great power competition, given that the most antagonistic couples (China-U.S., Russia-U.S., China-Japan) have their own interests in the region. The situation resembles the 1950-1980s period: client states and their great power supporters. This has become especially noticeable when North Korea started the old game of “balancing” between China and Russia (if not allies, at least non-hostile partners), trying to capitalize on their difficult relations with the United States.

The current reality is much more complicated than during the Cold War era. Back then, security on the Korean Peninsula was more or less guaranteed by the antagonistic (and more or less equal in military power - at least in destructive ability) nuclear superpowers, and the two Koreas could not do that much to bring themselves together. They could also not deepen their conflict, to where it might become a “hot” one. Now we witness a complicated interplay of controversial national interests of both big and small powers.

China, who had supported the DPRK in the Cold War era without any reservations, has changed its position. On the one hand, China is interested in preserving the status quo and keeping the state of North Korea in place. On the other hand, the North



Korean regime's internal policies and provocative external behavior causes more and more irritation in China. But China cannot afford losing an important buffer and seeing the whole of Korea becoming a sphere of U.S. influence. That would be seen as a major setback in geopolitical competition, the magnitude of U.S. losing control over Cuba in the early 1960s which through the Cuban missile crisis almost led to a third World War.

The possibility of changing the regime to a more loyal and predictable one must have crossed the minds of Chinese policy makers. The paranoically suspicious North Korean leaders might feel or suspect it. Therefore China must be increasingly perceived in Pyongyang as an existential threat rather than an ally. Some suggest that its nuclear and missile program, developed by North Korea with vigor, is meant as a hedge not so much against the United States and South Korea, but China. Getting closer to Russia as a balancer fits well into this picture.

Therefore rapprochement with South Korea and concessions would not help Pyongyang much in regime conservation. It should be noted that there are few objective reasons for the North to shift its diplomatic focus and hopes for solving its problems from big international actors – especially the U.S. and China – to South Korea. Therefore, conciliatory steps by Pyongyang towards Seoul, including concessions, cannot be expected if there is no reciprocity. And reciprocity from the South does not mean “small carrots” (such as aid) in Pyongyang's eyes. But the ROK's hands are tied as the U.S. does not want to accept North Korea's nuclear status and would control the extent to which South Korea may assist stabilization of the North.

At the same time a limited economic liberalization underway in North Korea eases the economic situation and makes aid from the South less crucial. What really matters for Pyongyang is the lifting of sanctions and regaining access to the international financial system, but this also depends on the U.S. Thus Seoul could mean no more than a stopover on the way to Washington.

On the other hand, for Pyongyang, decreasing hostility towards the South may have an unwelcome demobilizing effect on the North Korean population and create new channels for Southern “soft power” penetration, which may be dangerous for the regime.

Therefore, the author believes that if the ROK would not reconsider the basic concept of its unification policy, the pendulum “from tension to détente” will keep on swinging.

What is the Alternative?

Is there a way out of the impasse and what role can both Koreas play at this point? What, other than the unlikely change of regime in North Korea, can be compatible with South Korean interests and not contradict the U.S., China, and other countries' interests?

Such a concept should provide for “conventionalizing” North Korea to the extent it would become a normal and accepted member of the international community with a market economy, participation (if limited) of the population in governance, and non-excessive defense capabilities (not needing extraordinary means such as nuclear weapons or cyber warfare capabilities) to preserve its sovereignty and independence. Evolutional internal reforms would be needed, but they are impossible in the absence of a security guarantee for the ruling regime. So far, the U.S. and its allies have never accepted such a possibility, as it contradicted both moral and ideological interests and pragmatic military-political objectives.

If a new policy is to be introduced, the difference with previous half-hearted attempts with a “hidden agenda,” like the Sunshine Policy, should be that it must take into consideration the interests of the Northern ruling class. The root of the problem seems to be the regretful misunderstanding in Washington and Seoul of the North Korean political elite. Because they are supported by the North Korean population, any idea of unification based upon circumventing or destroying the North Korean ruling elite is doomed to failure.

Such a strategy is based on misjudgment of North Korean reality. The North Korean political system is actually not an isolated family dictatorship, but a hereditary aristocracy/meritocracy, created much along the lines of Confucian tradition, already in its third and fourth generation. It cannot be lured into partial concessions. Unlike in former USSR or communist countries, neither the members of the current elite nor their siblings could hope to become successful capitalists or officials under any new South-dominated regime. Obviously, after a South Korea-led unification, the elite class can expect persecution or relegation to outlaw status. And it should be well understood, that even an end to Kim's dynasty would not mean the destruction of the system — a new royal clan will seize power, maybe with foreign assistance. History of monarchies, including the Korean one, should give a clue to what might happen. And thus the division of the Korean nation would be prolonged if not perpetuated.



If we are to analyze North Korean goals vis-à-vis the South, it is very hard to believe that the goals of “communization” of the Korean Peninsula (for which the disengagement of the United States is a prerequisite) could still remain a guiding light for North Korean policy makers as it was in the 1960s-1980s, although such a vision might still be referred to in Pyongyang. For any practical intents and purposes, the North Korean aim is to contain South Korea, prevent it from taking over the North, and to exert as much assistance as possible by different means: from blackmailing in a “sea of fire” style to appealing to its common ethnic heritage and tradition. Unification does not enter into this picture any time soon.

ROK inflexibility on its basic concept of “southernization” of the North gives Pyongyang, as shown before, no incentive to change its hostile stance and egoistic approaches. Attempts to start a dialogue with the South (periodically resurfacing since January 2014, when the DPRK National Defense commission addressed the ROK with a broad suggestion for “improving inter-Korean relations with the united power of the Korean nation”) are therefore futile.

Seoul’s current public view on the prospects of reunification includes three steps: removing nuclear weapons; building up inter-Korean rapprochement; and creating a conducive international environment. How acceptable is this to North Korea? The author believes it is not a realistic recipe. For example, the reaction of President Park Geun-hye to the idea of an inter-Korean summit, proposed by Kim Jong-un in early 2015, was dubious—on the one hand, agreement to the summit without conditions was stated, on the other, the same old rhetoric of “sincerity” and denuclearization was repeated. Most of Seoul’s initiatives could hardly get off the ground. For example, the plan, which proposed a railway connecting Seoul to the North Korean cities of Pyongyang and Sinuiju, the establishment of cultural centers in both capitals, and a number of commemorative events marking the 70th anniversary of liberation from Japanese colonial rule was not realistic enough. Such proposals did not look very convincing when Seoul continued joint military exercises with the U.S. and resorted to even stricter observance of the National Security law, which essentially criminalizes support for Pyongyang. The efforts of civil groups to send leaflets to North Korea were not stopped, although the government does have authority to do so. Later, a row burst out at the Kaesong Industrial Complex regarding North Korea’s decision to unilaterally increase the wages of its workers.

In May, North Korea issued a warning to the South Korean navy, saying it would fire upon any vessel that crosses the disputed maritime border, the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the Yellow Sea. Another irritant was the test firing of a ballistic missile from a submarine (which is clearly provocative, even if there are doubts on what really happened).

Therefore, Russian experts conclude that the ROK unification policy remained half-hearted and with a “double agenda.” As well-known scholar Leonid Petrov noted, “The fallacy of this proposal is rooted in ROK’s reluctance to recognize the legitimacy of DPRK regime and, therefore, to effectively end the Korean War...Without abolishing the respective National Security Laws, no inter-Korean economic projects can be sustainable...South Korea cannot build trust with North Korea and simultaneously practice landing operation with U.S. Army.”⁴ Compatibility between current basic strategies of the North and South in unification matters is very limited.

The possibilities are there. The question is the political will – not lacking on the Russian side, as many (but not all) experts in Moscow see Korea as a possible field for multilateral cooperation (with U.S. involvement, which is now important for Russia. Of course, the U.S. role is crucial. However at this point, it is South Korea that should take the driver’s seat. Isn’t it time for Seoul to change the approach—recognize geopolitical realities as well as the resilience of the North Korean regime that could, unfortunately for the North Korean population if a chance for its evolution is lost again, linger on for many decades? Isn’t it time for South Korea to work out a new policy and then persuade the United States that this policy can also be beneficial for American interests? Seoul should grab the opportunity of the potential readiness of Kim Jong-un’s younger leadership for a compromise (demonstrated on many occasions, but interrupted when met with a cool response by military psychosis and belligerent propaganda blasts). That could also soften the regime, now exceeding its predecessor in terror tactics.

What could be the essence of the new policy? Such a policy could only be one of engagement. The author believes the ROK government might declare the start of a new cycle of national reconciliation by changing its overall approach, and lifting the sanctions against North Korea would be a good start.



Endnotes

- ¹ *The Uneasy Neighborhood: Korean Peninsula Problems and Challenges for Russia*, edited by G. Toloraya (Moscow: MGIMO Publ., 2015), p. 4.
- ² <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/46860>
- ³ Sarah Kim, "Minister Says Unification Will Come as a Surprise," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, January 26, 2015, at <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3000089> (June 4, 2015).
- ⁴ Rob York, "North Korea Watchers Unimpressed by South's Unification Proposals," *NK News*, January 20, 2015, at <http://www.nknews.org/2015/01/north-korea-watchers-unimpressed-by-souths-unification-charter/> (June 4, 2015).

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