



## RUSSIA AND THE TWO KOREAS IN THE CONTEXT OF MOSCOW'S ASIAN POLICY

By Stephen Blank

### Abstract

Russia views the international political system as transitioning from one dominated by Western powers to a multipolar system led by rising Asian countries, among which it includes itself. Officials in Moscow have undertaken a strategy of countering the U.S. in areas where they have relevant interests to engender a polycentric world order, wherein Russia would have greater control over global affairs. Pivotal for Russia's desire to shape an emerging global order are its policies in Asia, especially in relation to security concerns on the Korean Peninsula. Securing stability in the region is crucial for Moscow's desired ascent to great power status, with conflict stemming from North Korea endangering its influence in Asia as well as undermining plans for the foreign aided development of Russia's Far East region. Long overshadowed by other players in diplomatic talks with North Korea, Russia continues to rely on economic infrastructure initiatives with both Koreas to uphold its security preferences and relevance at the negotiating table. As Moscow works with Beijing to balance against Washington in world politics it also competes with Beijing for leverage over Pyongyang, exploiting a recent gap between North Korea and China for rapprochement with Pyongyang. Whereas China has been critical of recent North Korean provocations, Russia is likely to tolerate such behavior until its vital interests are threatened. Nevertheless, Moscow faces significant challenges in its attempt to maintain a stable Asian security framework in the form of its declining economic situation, containment of its rise in the region by China, and a nebulous vision as to what a multipolar structure should look like.

**Key words:** *Russia, North Korea, multipolarity, Russo-Chinese rivalry, Asian regional security*

### Introduction

Contrary to much exaggerated media commentary, Russia's pivot to Asia had already begun by 2008 not in 2013-14.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it had nothing to do with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. That event merely accelerated and intensified an ongoing, deliberate effort to assert Russia's independence as a great power in Asia, which it recognizes as the dynamic center of the global economy and world politics.<sup>2</sup> Within this heightened emphasis on Asia, the importance for Russia of being recognized as a reliable and valuable interlocutor with all the members of the Six-Party Talks—and as an influential participant in the future resolution of the inter-Korean conflict—is second only to the overriding necessity of strategic partnership with China. Such recognition is an essential precondition for Russia to gain the status it craves as an independent, great, “system-forming” power in East Asia and to obtain foreign assistance for its critical priority of economic development in Russia's Far East (RFE).

Scholars have long grasped that an essential element of Russia's Asian policies is to obtain the resources from abroad that are needed to develop the RFE and create the material foundation for realizing Russia's status aspirations here. As Vitaly Kozyrev wrote in 2010,

Indeed, the development of the distant Russian territories in Eastern Siberia and the Far East creates another rationale for integration security strategies with East Asia. The exceptional geostrategic role of Russia's eastern territories, along with a substantial portion of the Siberian and Far Eastern region in the spheres of transportation and energy resources distribution in Eurasia, raises the importance of Russia's policy of turning these Russian territories into a regional hub of both technological and infrastructural development.<sup>3</sup>

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Indeed, the heart of Moscow's proposals for both Koreas is the building of a trans-Siberian and then Trans-Korean railway (TSR-TKR), a proposal that dates back to the 1890s, and a trans-Korean gas pipeline that links up to some of Russia's major gas deposits in Siberia and the RFE. On the basis of these proposals, Moscow hopes to become a major energy provider to North Korea, easing Pyongyang's demand for nuclear energy, and a major supplier to the ROK. It would also gain influence over the economics and politics of both states and pose as a material and vital contributor to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Not only has Moscow long since entered into talks with South Korea about providing it gas, it has also raised the issue of directly supplying North Korea with gas from Sakhalin.<sup>4</sup> Since a Korean war virtually precludes any hope of the RFE's peaceful development and exposes Russia to intense risks that could only undermine both its internal development and quest for independent great power status, Russia regards the prospect of war in Korea as a geopolitical nightmare that must be avoided by all available means.

Therefore, the fundamental purpose of Russia's Korean policy is to preserve peace in Korea and Asia generally, as peace is indispensable to any development of Siberia and the RFE on the basis of foreign and domestic trade and investment. Peace is in turn a necessary precondition for Russia to play the role it covets in East Asia. Only if Russia can play the role of peacekeeper can it actively help create and sustain the multipolar world that its officials and analysts either believe exists or should come into being. Accordingly, Moscow's Korean policies are not just part of its overall Asian program but are also an essential component of promoting this multipolar world order. Only in this context can we fully grasp Moscow's goals and motives on the Korean Peninsula.

### Russia's Concept of Multipolarity

Since Yevgeny Primakov became Foreign Minister in 1996, Russia has argued for a multipolar world order where it constitutes one of the recognized poles. Even now, multipolarity remains important in Russian rhetoric as a way to redress Moscow's global diminution since the 1990s. Ultimately it is a formulation intended to fix not only the regional Asian order but also Russia's sense of exclusion from the global position it craves but cannot sustain. Russian discourse about multipolarity postulates that multipolarity is most congruent with Asia's international realities.<sup>5</sup> Officials and analysts contend that multipolarity is a result of the post-Cold War transition, the emergence or

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re-emergence of cultural and civilizational diversity, and the economic transformation and rise of new powers associated with globalization. Allegedly these trends prevent any one power from leading the world, and all powers must accept a multipolar world order if they wish to pursue a rational policy that enhances their security.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, world events are supposedly moving ever faster in the direction of this multipolarity or polycentrism.<sup>7</sup> For Russia, the Korean Peninsula appears to be particularly key – and the Six-Party Talks, by virtue of their inherent multilateral design, formally embody key requirements and preconditions for multipolarity. Russian officials acknowledge that Asia is not only the dynamo of the global economy but also postulate an emerging “polycentric world order” largely composed of rising Asian powers.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Russian leaders insist that the West is declining and that the Asian powers (among whom it includes itself) are rising.<sup>9</sup> However, Russian foreign policy aims to consolidate Russia's position as what Foreign Minister Lavrov calls a premier center of power and influence of the new polycentric system despite constant Western resistance to this trend.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, Russian writers have long viewed Western policies as manifestations of the desire to prevent Russia's supposedly foreordained rise and preserve unipolarity. As the Valdai Discussion club, a club of international analysts that grew out of the annual meetings with Putin at Valdai and now publishes daily papers and articles, stated in 2009:

Russia views itself as a pole of a multipolar world, which conducts independent domestic and foreign policy based on its own interpretation of national interests and its own

model of development. At the same time, Washington's global strategy boils down to a search for ways of restoring unipolarity by this or that means.<sup>11</sup>

In response, Russian leaders led by Putin, invoke U.S. decline and Russia's rise claiming that, "We do not want to return to confrontations between blocs. We do not want to split the world into various military and political groups. But Russia has sufficient potential to influence the construction of a new world system."<sup>12</sup> Thus Russia is a "system-forming" power in its own right, both globally and in Asia.<sup>13</sup> Not content with merely a regional role, Russia sees itself as an integral global power that is essential to constructing this global order. Or as Sergei Yastrzhemskiy, Putin's foreign policy advisor said in 2007, "Russia should play its role whenever we have relevant interests."<sup>14</sup>

That project is achievable only by leveraging Russia's presence in key regions to midwife anti-American coalitions to force Washington to acknowledge Russia's equal status and role. Thus Russia cannot be excluded from participation wherever it has "relevant interests." From Moscow's standpoint this is exactly what it has achieved in Korea, even if other players have regarded it as a "nuisance."<sup>15</sup> To play in this new order, Russia must ensure favorable conditions for its modernization, elicit large-scale foreign investment, participate in Asian integration and other processes, and propose a new Asian order free of military blocs (i.e. the U.S. alliance system).<sup>16</sup> Consequently, Moscow vigorously pursues summitry, high-level diplomatic meetings and speeches, and energy and arms sales, its main currencies of power in East Asia. Furthermore, Russia, as it has done since Leonid Brezhnev, continues to "proceed from the assumption that one of the most important prerequisites and components of the denuclearization process is the formation of regional common security institutions which would be based on the principle of equal security to all parties."<sup>17</sup>

However, as both Russian and foreign commentators know, Russia not only faces serious difficulties in Asia: it risks marginalization that would foreclose its quest for great power status both regionally and globally. To prevent such outcomes, Moscow views it as essential that no war break out over Korea and that Russia always be included as an equal member of any Korean peace process. As past experience shows, Russia has had to fight to gain inclusion in that group and be taken seriously in Asia.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Putin's overall Asian policy began in 2000 with a trip to North Korea because he grasped that lacking dialogue with Pyongyang had marginalized Russia

regarding Asian security. Moscow still believes this to be true and acts accordingly.

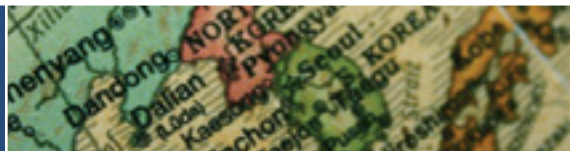
Moscow has no real ideas about organizing peace in Korea other than large-scale joint economic proposals with both Koreas and bandwagoning with China against the U.S. in world politics, while competing with China inside North Korea to gain leverage over Pyongyang. This is an inherently contradictory posture that is further vitiated by Russia's structural inability to develop its Asian provinces. That failure condemns it, especially under conditions of sanctions, non-reform at home, and falling energy prices, to a growing dependence on Beijing that it cannot really accept.<sup>19</sup> Bandwagoning with Beijing is ultimately no answer because it is a response to American policy not Asian issues. It is also a policy that cuts across Russian interests. First, it subordinates Russian economic development in Asia to Chinese plans.<sup>20</sup> Second, an independent great power in Asia cannot simultaneously accept Chinese policies in Asia that seek to bulldoze not just Russia but also Southeast Asia and Japan.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, China certainly has no intention of recognizing Russia as an equal great power in Asia.<sup>22</sup>

Consequently there can be no purely regional crisis in the key areas where Russia believes it is or should be situated, and the potential for any crisis to escalate, even against its participants' intentions, creates the ever-present possibility of a global crisis where nuclear arms provide both the background music and are the primary instrumental soloists.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, Moscow feels it must create means to defend Russian interests in all key regions by challenging the U.S. and postulating an *a priori* presupposition of conflict and rivalry with other poles, especially but not only the U.S., even as Russia seeks a consortium with them. That strategy in turn dictates a policy to strengthen the state's capacity to conduct policy and the economy that allows it to pose as a great power and gives it the resources needed to do so.

### Russia's Dilemmas, Tactics and Goals in Korea

The Korean Peninsula exemplifies many of the points cited above. Regional bipolarity or an Asian regional multipolarity is a precondition for gaining global great power status in an acknowledged multipolar world order. For over a century, local developments have engaged Russia's vital interests, both in the realm of security and in economics.

The region is a long-standing tinderbox made more unstable by the difficulties in making sense of DPRK policy under Kim



Jong-un. Conflict there could not only drag in China and the U.S., it could also put vital domestic Russian interests at great risk. These facts obligate Russia, as noted above, to leverage its regional standing in Northeast Asia to force the U.S. and its allies there to take Russian interests seriously and include it in the Six-Party process. The whole point of Russian foreign policy is to prevent any external risks to the internal order and projected development of the Russian Federation. Therefore Russia, to be a global player, must assert its interests and diplomacy here. In 2002 Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov stated that:

The creation of favorable external conditions for the successful internal development of Russia is the main criterion for the effectiveness of our policies. The most important of these is ensuring the country's reliable security. Taking into account modern threats and challenges as well as our capabilities and resources, we are attempting to resolve this task by political and diplomatic means based on extensive multilateral and bilateral cooperation.<sup>24</sup>

In the Korean case this linkage, articulated first by Ivanov and then repeatedly by Putin, Foreign Minister Lavrov, and many others, possesses special significance. In 2010-11, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexei Borodavkin, Russia's delegate to the Six-Party Talks, warned that the Korean Peninsula was on the brink of war.<sup>25</sup> Borodavkin further underscored Russia's genuine alarm about Korea by stating that the aggravation of Asian conflicts, together with the global economic crisis had created a situation where, "Under current circumstances, peace and security in the region is a priority task because we believe that neither nuclear deterrence nor military deterrence may ensure security in this sub-region and in the entire world."<sup>26</sup> Further North Korean provocations might push one or another actor over the edge and Russia could do nothing to stop it. Indeed, Moscow might be dragged into such a war with no control over any of the protagonists. Thus, Russia could not defend its vital interests yet could be dragged into a war that spilled over into Russian territory or that engendered a Sino-American confrontation. This would also terminate any hope of developing the RFE, the precondition for any effective Russian policy in Asia.

These apprehensions drove the rapprochement with North Korea that has lasted since 2011. And they continue to drive Russian military planning. Almost every Russian military exercise in Russia's Far East contains a scenario of a so-called "ecological catastrophe" and the influx of thousands of refugees due to a nuclear war on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Moscow

deployed its new S-400 SAM to the RFE because it feared that North Korea might launch more missiles that either go awry or worse and provoke a major conflict in Northeast Asia.<sup>28</sup> Russian diplomats and analysts still voice those apprehensions even if they must do so elliptically.<sup>29</sup>

In 2011, the commander of Russia's nuclear forces, General Sergei Karakayev, warned that expanding the nuclear club—which he attributed to U.S. policy as part of Moscow's inveterate anti-American global posture—could drag Russia into war. North Korean and Iranian proliferation could lead the U.S. to attack them and thus start a major war. Moreover, proliferation leads to a reduction of the threshold for nuclear use, thus creating preconditions for a war near Russia that could go nuclear and/or drag Russia into it.<sup>30</sup> This is a common Russian military assessment of the threat and it leads Russia to seek increased leverage over the DPRK through energy and railway projects to reduce the danger to Moscow and the likelihood of such a U.S. or DPRK attack. And as the situation on the Korean Peninsula has not changed but arguably become more intractable and even dangerous, these arguments still hold in Moscow.

Indeed, as North Korea steadily improves its nuclear, missile and rocket capabilities while its policies appear ever more erratic, the likelihood of conflict breaking out remains high. These dangers to Russia from North Korean actions that it cannot influence, much less control, are extremely acute. A 2010 article in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' journal *International Affairs* (incidentally quoting a Chinese analyst Zhou Feng) starkly underlined the dangers of war in Korea:

Indeed, the situation on the Korean Peninsula, which is in close proximity to our Far Eastern borders, is explosive and fraught with the most unpredictable consequences. Peace is very fragile here. No one can guarantee that it will not collapse as a result of a clash between the two Koreas with the involvement of other countries in the conflict and the use of weapons of mass destruction. "The aggravation of the North Korean nuclear issue is one of the long standing problems leading to new ones. This issue cannot be expected to be settled easily because difficulties have emerged in relations among large East Asian states. The settlement process can subsequently lead to a redistribution of roles of large states on the Asian political field – that is a new regional security problem."<sup>31</sup>

That restructuring of the Asian political order could easily ensue at Russia's expense and do so by means over which Russia has



little or no influence. While Moscow has long said that it does not fear Korean unification and might actually welcome it, Russia could only do so if it happened peacefully not through war.<sup>32</sup> This last point leads some analysts like Georgi Toloraya to propose opposing unification lest that provoke precisely the war Russia dreads.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile Pyongyang's activities justify the U.S. missile defense program in Asia, and American plans to deploy these missile defenses in Asia and offer the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system to Seoul clearly alarm both Moscow and Beijing.<sup>34</sup> In fact, it is precisely the deployment of missile defenses and advanced strike capabilities in Asia that apparently most irritates Russia even though it does not seem to draw the conclusion that North Korea's policies bear more than a little responsibility for these deployments.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov warned that any state deploying these missile defense and aligned systems could become the target of Russian nuclear and missile strikes.<sup>36</sup>

Under the circumstances, asserting Russia's own interest and seeking some measure of influence and dialogue with the DPRK while continuing its friendly ties to the ROK is a vital necessity. And the only cards Russia has to play are its long-standing dream of a TSR-TKR project and a Trans-Korea gas (if not oil as well) pipeline connected to Russian fields in eastern Siberia and Russian Asia that would send energy to both states and allow the DPRK to alleviate its economic crisis through tariffs. Increasingly, Russian leaders and analysts believe that Moscow, to avert such perceptions and outcomes, must play a more independent role in Korea and Asia.

Indeed, leading Russian Korea experts have recently more openly articulated the idea that Russia must pursue policies that are independent of China's policies towards North Korea to advance its regional interests. In late 2013 Aleksandr Zhebin of the Russian Academy of Sciences Far East Center, Institute for Korean Studies, wrote that North Korea had previously acted without regard for Russian interests and this is happening again with its nuclear and missile programs. These processes create crises that almost approached in intensity the Cuban missile crisis (a red flag to any Russian writer). In the current situation, North Korea's policies could trigger the "most unexpected developments." Zhebin also argues that for North Korea it is still important to demonstrate the existence of the "Moscow alternative to the United States and its allies and also to China," indicating his view that if Russia pursued Korean objectives that are distinct from both the U.S. and China, it would encounter a sympathetic North

Korean response. He therefore warned Pyongyang, "The degree of support and understanding that the DPRK can expect from Russia must clearly be directly proportionate to Pyongyang's readiness to consult with Moscow on questions directly affecting our security interests."<sup>37</sup> This warning, of course, indicated Moscow's chagrin at the fact that North Korea does not give Russia a veto or even leverage on its decisions whether or not they affect Russian security interests, vital or otherwise.

Similarly, Georgi Toloraya and Alexander Vorontsov in 2014 openly advocated an overt competition with China here rather than the previous passivity that they argue prevents Russia from realizing its regional goals in Asia:

This kind of behavior will not contribute to a more active Russian policy in the Asia-Pacific region, where people closely follow Russia's reactions to crisis situations and draw their conclusions accordingly. The cooling in relations between North Korea and China over the Chang Song-Thaek affair gives Russian diplomats an opportunity to cultivate closer relations with the elite in Pyongyang. With a new generation just having come to power in Beijing too, a warming in relations between China and its unpredictable neighbor is unlikely in the near future. This gives Russia a "window of opportunity" to establish a more trusting relationship with Kim Jong-un and his new leadership, using traditional diplomatic methods, economic levers, and "soft power."<sup>38</sup>

Economics are also key in Russia's policy considerations. By supplying both Koreas with energy Moscow could, at a single stroke, establish itself as a major player in Korea, and facilitate more inter-Korean cooperation. These projects would also establish Russia as a major participant in the Six-Party Talks rather than a marginal figure. Some analysts, e.g. Keun-Wook Paik, have cited the benefits that would accrue to Russia from a direct pipeline to one or both Korean states.<sup>39</sup>

Victor Cha's account of the Six-Party process similarly demonstrates that the railway and pipeline proposals are the cornerstones of Russia's negotiating position on the Korean crisis but also that neither the U.S. nor others see Russia's presence here as having particular importance. He characterizes Russia as the forgotten partner or bit player of "peripheral" importance.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, and entirely characteristically, Russian diplomats obsessively revisited the idea of a gas pipeline and railway as the solution to any problem in these talks. As he writes:

The latter two objectives are advocated by Russian interlocutors in almost blind fashion. During the Six-Party Talks, whenever we ran into a deadlock with the North Koreans over the nuclear issue the Russian answer to breaking any deadlock was “gas pipelines and the Trans-Siberian Railway.”<sup>41</sup>

These projects would reestablish Russia’s influence in North Korea. Russia, like its partners in the Six-Party process, has few means to leverage North Korea. Moreover, it suffers from two fundamental disadvantages in these talks (and not only here). First, if the parties were to actually effectuate a meaningful rapprochement, Russia’s relevance to the outcome would steadily decline.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, if Russia is to possess any mechanism or vehicle by which it could retain enduring influence upon either or both Korean states, agreement on this pipeline would have to precede any general agreement with the U.S., ROK, etc., and that is exactly what Moscow is now attempting to accomplish. Secondly, if this deal collapses then Russia would have been shown to have virtually no leverage at all upon North Korea. As we have seen above in General Karakayev’s warnings from 2010-11, Zhebin and Cha’s analysis show that Russia possesses little or no leverage under current conditions on North Korea yet North Korea can wreak enormous “collateral damage” upon Russia and its interests.<sup>43</sup> Thus as Cha and Zhebin suggest, absent any agreement on this pipeline and railway, Russia stands to lose whatever influence it now has over North Korea. This is particularly dangerous to Russia because of the concurrent possibility that North Korea could cause “collateral damage” to Russia without Moscow being able to do anything about that situation.<sup>44</sup>

These considerations explain the rapprochement between Pyongyang and Moscow. In Pyongyang’s case it is emulating the time-honored tactic of balancing between China and Russia and finds Russia much less willing to try and dominate it or give it lectures about not making trouble and reforming its economy, yet it cannot do without Chinese aid. Kim Jong-un’s violent purges, sporadic threats to South Korea, and ongoing weapons programs have all aroused China’s continuing anger but there is nothing it will do or, from its standpoint can do, except to ride out the storms and maintain steady pressure to prevent a crisis from exploding.<sup>45</sup> Inasmuch as Pyongyang habitually provokes a crisis with the South to force Beijing to pay it more attention, Chinese rulers may also be making discreet military signals to North Korea to cool off these crises even as it indicates that it

has received the North Korean message.<sup>46</sup> And North Korea’s agreement with South Korea on August 25, 2015 suggests that it also got China’s message about not provoking a crisis as China launches its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the end of World War II in Asia.<sup>47</sup>

### Russian Balance Against the U.S. and China

For Moscow—as for Beijing in its own way—Korea connects to the broader Asian and now global strategy of the government. In the current conditions that means anti-Americanism and closer bandwagoning with China against the West even as it competes with China in North Korea and elsewhere in East Asia. According to Korea expert Aleksandr Vorontsov, North Korea, like Russia, wants to achieve a comprehensive system of security on the peninsula that would not only include a full treaty with and recognition by the U.S. to effectuate a normalization of relations with Pyongyang, but also leave it as a nuclear state.<sup>48</sup> Obviously, this is no basis for a negotiation.

So now we have a situation that entails Moscow’s steadily growing opposition to Washington’s alleged efforts to threaten, intimidate, and intervene in North Korea and its domestic policies. Thus Moscow champions the DPRK regime even though Russian experts are fully aware of North Korea’s pathologies. Indeed some analysts even predicted, and still predict, the collapse of North Korea but were overruled.<sup>49</sup> Toloraya, for example rules out regime collapse as a scenario and suggests that North Korea’s resilience “may prompt” the ROK and U.S. to take the ruling elites of the DPRK’s interests into account.<sup>50</sup> Logically this means—and he does not shrink from this—that Russia’s policy goal is to maintain the existing structure for stability even if other observers see little grounds for stability in North Korea.<sup>51</sup> What this means in practice is that Russia will not step in to stop Pyongyang’s provocative behavior and might actually encourage it until it gets close to threatening vital Russian interests. And judging when that occurs is a process that is inherently fraught with peril and prone to misperception. Meanwhile Russian diplomats and analysts, even when criticizing Pyongyang’s provocative behavior, blame Washington equally if not more.<sup>52</sup> If anything, Ukraine and shared determination to resist the West will bring Moscow and Pyongyang closer together.

This perspective leads Russia to view the Korean Peninsula and security agenda idiosyncratically. First, Russia will continue to view events in Korea from the governing anti-American



perspective that must be maintained at all costs. North Korea must be preserved, though in some sense managed so that it does not generate new risks. But its nuclear issue can only be addressed from the perspective of solving all other issues with it as well and thwarting Washington's alliance system in Asia. Likewise, because Moscow is shut out of the West and Asia becomes more important for it, cementing trilateral economic projects with both Koreas becomes even more critical.<sup>53</sup>

Moscow will also work with China to frustrate U.S. demands for intervention (as they see it) in North Korea's domestic affairs and what they claim are its persisting tendencies towards externally coerced regime change. Instead they still support the idea of a return to the Six-Party process talks without preconditions, exactly what North Korea wants.<sup>54</sup> Second, regional rivalry for influence over both Koreas will continue behind the scenes but may become more visible depending on how China decides to deal with Pyongyang's insulting and violent rebuffs to its North Korean policies. This process conforms to the larger idea that Sino-Russian cooperation against Washington occurs mainly at the global level and in bilateral economic ties, but at the level of Asian regional security, rivalry equals, if it does not surpass, cooperation.<sup>55</sup>

Third, Moscow will continue, as before, to blame Washington for the Korean crisis because of its pressure upon North Korea which has long since been assimilated into the larger narrative of America's congenital and unrelenting Russophobia. Indeed, Zhebin has already taken up this line.<sup>56</sup> Fourth, as Zhebin also suggested, the Russo-DPRK rapprochement will be envisaged as signifying that even the DPRK can play a real if limited role in the realignment of global political forces in Moscow's favor.<sup>57</sup> Zhebin also wrote that North Korea's military programs and responses to UN queries and pressure shows that we will have to deal with North Korea as a de facto nuclear state.<sup>58</sup> Since Washington and Seoul adamantly oppose any such recognition, evidently Russian analysts anticipate and welcome a continuing deadlock on this issue. After all, deadlock forces Pyongyang to turn back to Moscow and Beijing rather than the U.S. and its allies for the economic benefits that Russia can and will provide. Therefore we cannot count on Russian support for denuclearizing North Korea despite its protestations to the contrary. Here as elsewhere, Moscow benefits or believes it benefits from persistent conflict.

Neither is it clear that Moscow will ultimately gain some lasting influence or leverage upon North Korea. Kim Jong-un's decision not to go to Moscow for the anniversary celebrations of World War II's end because he would not receive special treatment

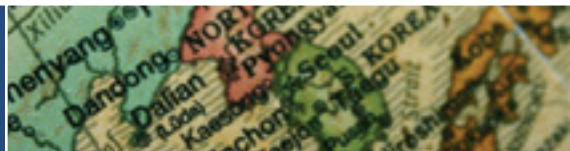
suggests the persistence of a North Korean perspective at odds with all of its interlocutors.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the violent erratic policies of a regime that has already killed 15 senior officials in 2015 also denotes a fundamental lack of stability and predictability that will likely upset every players' calculations.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps more unpredictability in Korea was inevitable, but Moscow's policies here help ensure that North Korea and its partners will live in interesting times. Indeed, Toloraya acknowledges that the situation is deteriorating and that in the context of East-West tensions generated by the war in Ukraine and deteriorating Sino-DPRK relations, North Korea is becoming more isolated. Indeed, he argues that China may well be thinking of promoting a regime change in North Korea and has thus become an existential threat to North Korea who therefore logically is gravitating towards Russia as a balancer.<sup>61</sup>

This recommendation comports with Toloraya and Vorontsov's 2014 recommendations cited above.<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, this way of thinking postulates the contradictory premises that Moscow can bandwagon with Beijing against the U.S. and its alliances to support North Korean independence but that it can at the same time provide a viable alternative to China in North Korean eyes. At a time when Russia's economy is in much worse shape than advertised and will not reform even if there was no external pressure, it will be unable to compete with China in North Korea on any viable or tangible basis. And even if China's current crisis due to the bursting of its financial bubble inhibits its ability to support North Korea, China will not allow Russia to grow stronger in Asia at its expense.<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, it is by no means clear that Russia can get its projects built in North and South Korea or at home given its own decrepit economic situation. Ultimately, Russia's own economic failure will prove to be the decisive factor in limiting its ability to have lasting influence in North Korea or anywhere else in Northeast Asia. Until the Russian government addresses this issue (and it is almost certain that Putin cannot do and will not do so), it can maneuver all it likes but it cannot attain its own sought after status or positively contribute to the cause of peace and security on the Korean Peninsula.

## Conclusion

Russian writers believe Russia is inherently a pole of the multipolar order because of its nuclear weapons, size, power potential (not necessarily its real power), and permanent



membership in the UNSC. Many officials and writers also assert, albeit with little justification, that Russia is successfully raising its profile in Asia.<sup>64</sup> Given the repercussions of Russian aggression in Ukraine it may more accurately be argued, according to Gilbert Rozman, that, “Sino-Russian rhetoric about the harmonious relationship they have achieved is not reliable since we are back to an atmosphere where propaganda is prioritized over objective analysis.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that despite the strong cooperation between Russia and China, when it comes to regional security issues in the Asia-Pacific region, there is considerable daylight between them. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi may have just approached Lavrov about strengthening the strategic coordination on Asia-Pacific affairs, but from Chinese analyses of the relationship extolling the basis for cooperation, regional security in the Asia-Pacific is conspicuously absent.<sup>66</sup>

Lavrov has extended Primakov’s original formulation that America’s unipolar proclivities threaten Russia and must be resisted by becoming an independent counterpole to America globally and in each region of the world. Moreover, by formulating tactical agreements with other key regional actors across the globe, Moscow claims it helped spawn other poles or enabled them to act more resolutely against the U.S.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, at least one writer argues that Russia bears primary responsibility for frustrating American unilateralism by shaping blocking coalitions that restrained and ultimately foiled U.S. designs.<sup>68</sup> In other words, Russia’s alleged global great power role status helps to thwart Washington and to gain other states’ recognition of that status, thereby constituting the essence of its multipolarity doctrine, a rather negative or limited view of the trend towards multipolarity. Anti-Americanism, not considerations of regional configurations of power, drives multipolarity in Korea as elsewhere. Indeed, Sinologist Aleksandr Lukin and former Ambassador to Seoul Valery Denisov admit that, “The approach of Russia and China to the problems of the Korean peninsula will be determined, even in the long term by triangular relations with Moscow and Beijing.”<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, Russia’s concept of multipolarity essentially boils down to an expanded vision of the Concert of Powers set up at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 or what Dmitri Trenin calls a “benign oligarchy.”<sup>70</sup> Not surprisingly, Russia’s concept of multilateral or network diplomacy means “collective leadership of leading states who objectively bear responsibility for the state of world affairs.”<sup>71</sup> This openly advocates an exclusionary great power concert where a few big states decide matters for the small states who in Russia’s view, are not truly sovereign states anyway. Accordingly the only truly sovereign states, Russia, U.S., India, China, and possibly some European states and/or members of the Security Council lay down the rules for smaller states as at the Congress of Vienna or in the Grand Alliance during World War II.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, some Russian writers even explicitly invoke that latter system’s example.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, each pole fully respects or should respect each other pole’s sovereign democracy in their domain and refrain from intervening in their politics.<sup>74</sup>

Lastly, Russian leaders connect the advent of a multipolar order—driven largely by economic globalization and the ensuing rise of the BRICS—to American decline, Russia’s revival as an independent pole, and to strategic partnership with China in Asia.<sup>75</sup> They cite the war in Iraq as causing a decline in usable U.S. military power and the current financial crisis as indicators of U.S. irresponsibility and diminished capability. Thus Russia openly seeks to instrumentalize concepts of a multipolar order for its own advantages at the expense of both the U.S. and its allies and of smaller Asian powers in general. Yet there is little analysis of just what a multipolar order would or should look like other than that everyone recognizes Russia as an independent great power free to act in its chosen sphere of influence. This is an empty and self-serving definition of multipolarity and Russian leaders know they have no real ideas for peace and security throughout Asia, not just Korea.



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