

Sino-Russian Relations, South Korea, and North Korea

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This examination of the relations among these four governments assesses the ever-closer China-Russia relationship featuring stronger strategic alignment against the United States and its interests in many parts of the world, including the Korean Peninsula. It also considers how the Sino-Russian relationship reacted to the major changes in the Korean Peninsula brought on by the string of remarkable developments on the peninsula since 2017. Those developments include: the Donald Trump administration's heavy pressure against North Korean nuclear weapons development in 2017; North Korea's abrupt shift away from confrontation and toward negotiations with the U.S. and South Korea in early 2018; the subsequent dramatic shift toward top-level U.S.-North Korea negotiations to ease tensions and improve relations seen in Trump's meetings with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in June 2018 and February 2019; and active, related North Korean summitry with South Korea and China.

In this period, China and Russia in relations with South Korea and North Korea repeatedly worked together to offset U.S. pressures and undermine U.S. influence. Developments over the past two years have seen China emerge as a critically important player with a major role in all aspects of negotiations involving the crisis caused by North Korea's rapid development and repeated testing of nuclear weapons and related development and testing of ballistic missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead as far as the continental U.S.

By contrast, Russia's role and influence have declined in importance. The failed revival of the Six-Party Talks, in which Russia and Japan played a direct role along with North and South Korea, China, and the U.S. in dealing with the North Korean nuclear weapons crisis, and the current regional dynamic focused on only the four latter powers means that Moscow and Tokyo have been marginalized by recent developments. Such an outcome challenges the Russian government of President Vladimir Putin and its drive to play a prominent role as a leading world power on issues important to Russian interests. Demonstrating new prominence, Putin hosted visiting Kim during a brief summit long sought by Russia in Vladivostok on April 25. The Russian leader said North Korea's security concerns would be better met with international guarantees involving Russia and China rather than bilateral North Korean agreements with the U.S. Up until this point, Russia had been playing second fiddle to Beijing, repeatedly siding with China in matters regarding the Korean Peninsula. China, for its part, seemed comfortable with close cooperative relations with Russia as it deals with Korean matters. Whatever differences the two may have over Korean issues have been difficult to discern amid their collaboration and cooperation, which focus on weakening the American position in Korea and Northeast Asia.

Increasing Sino-Russian Alignment Against U.S. Interests

The partnership between Moscow and Beijing matured and broadened after the Cold War and significantly strengthened during the past decade. The dispositions of Putin and President Xi Jinping support forecasts of closer relations. The momentum is based on: 1) common objectives and values; 2) perceived Russian and Chinese vulnerabilities in the face of U.S. and Western pressures; and 3) perceived opportunities for the two powers to expand their influence at the expense of U.S. and allied powers seen in decline. The relationship has gone well beyond the common view a decade ago that Russian-Chinese ties represented an "axis of convenience" with limited impact on international affairs.¹

Increasingly, even longstanding observers doubtful of the significance of China-Russia cooperation are altering their positions in the face of clear and assertive moves by the two countries to challenge the U.S. and shape the international order along lines they favor. Heading the list of such evidence was the massive September 2018 Russian military exercise *Vostok*, involving 300,000 troops—bigger than any previous Russian exercise since the end of the Cold War—and featuring active participation of 3,200 Chinese fighting forces under “joint” Russian-Chinese command. The exercise took place against the backdrop of rising tensions in both countries’ relations with the U.S. over a wide range of security, economic, and diplomatic issues and ever advancing signs of mutual Sino-Russian support against the U.S., causing some skeptics of China-Russia cooperation to reluctantly acknowledge the *de facto* alliance.²

Today, Russia and China pose increasingly serious challenges to the U.S.-supported order in their respective priority spheres of concern—Russia in Europe and the Middle East, and China in Asia along its continental and maritime peripheries, including the Korean Peninsula. Russia’s challenges involve military and paramilitary actions in Europe and the Middle East, along with cyber and political warfare undermining elections in the U.S. and Europe, European unity, and NATO solidarity. China undermines U.S. and allied resolve through covert and overt manipulation and influence operations by employing economic incentives and propaganda. Chinese cyber attacks have focused more on massive theft of information and intellectual property to accelerate China’s economic competitiveness to dominate world markets in key advanced technology at the expense of leading international companies. Coercion and intimidation of neighbors backed by an impressive buildup of Chinese military and civilian security forces expands Beijing regional control and influence.

Russia and China work separately and together to complicate and curb U.S. power and influence in world politics, economy, and security. They coordinate their moves and support one another in their respective challenges to the U.S., allies and partners in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. These joint efforts also involve diplomatic, security, and economic measures in multilateral forums and bilateral relations involving U.S. opponents in Iran, Syria, and North Korea. The two powers also support one another in the face of U.S. and allied complaints about Russian and Chinese coercive expansion and other steps challenging regional order and global norms and institutions backed by the U.S.

The dramatic rise in tensions on the Korean Peninsula in 2017 followed by the equally dramatic U.S.-North Korean summitry provided repeated opportunities for Beijing and Moscow to work together in support of their interests and preferences, which are often at odds with those of the U.S. The U.S.’s ability to deal with the overall rising challenges of increasing China-Russia cooperation is commonly seen as in decline. The U.S. position in its triangular relationship with Russia and China has deteriorated, to the satisfaction of leaders in Moscow and Beijing opportunistically seeking to advance their power and influence. Russia’s tension with the West and ever deepening dependence on China and heretofore active U.S. constructive interaction with China gave Beijing the advantageous “hinge” position in the triangular relationship that the U.S. used to occupy.

From one perspective, the developing Russia-China rapprochement represents a failure of U.S. foreign policy strategy going back to the Nixon administration—that the U.S. would seek to have better relations with Russia and China than they had with one another. With the end of the Soviet Union and its threat to China, it is not surprising for Sino-Russian relations to

improve. But the degree of recent Sino-Russian collaboration, seemingly “double-teaming” the U.S., clearly disadvantages America and has reached sufficient importance that some urge the U.S. to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing as a strategic move. The failure to do so would leave in place a strengthening authoritarian axis increasingly capable of challenging the liberal order central to the American position in the world.³

A contrasting view is that the ever more extensive development of overlapping Russian-Chinese interests served by their mutual cooperation since the end of the Cold War makes any American effort to manipulate one against the other very difficult. Unlike the Sino-Soviet animus of the Cold War, the two powers have come to depend on each other for economic, military, and diplomatic support in the face of challenges they encounter brought on in particular by U.S. and Western policies at odds with their domestic and international ambitions. The prevailing pattern is ever-closer Sino-Russian cooperation in their respective opposition to a U.S.-led international order seen as disadvantaging them. At the same time, the values and outlook of authoritarian leaders in Moscow and Beijing converge in opposition to U.S. interests and goals; those leaders are not likely to change for the foreseeable future.⁴

Recent Russian and Chinese policy calculations show that the importance of improved relations with the U.S. is low for Putin and the Russian leadership; their world view focuses on addressing the American threat with coercive means short of war including military deployments, cyber attacks, and security assistance to American adversaries. Xi’s government continues to balance strong opposition to U.S. international leadership and perceived U.S. encirclement in Asia with avoidance of confrontation and conflict with the U.S. by managing differences. China has a much greater stake in the U.S.-led international order than does Russia, but Beijing strikes the balance in ways that seriously undermine the U.S. For example, China’s coercive advances to control disputed territory along its rim undermine the American position as regional security guarantor, and China’s ever-expanding military buildup seeks to turn the military balance of power in Asia against the U.S..

Complicating an effective U.S. policy response is the fact that U.S. and allied leaders remain preoccupied with troubles at home and abroad, creating a balance of international power favoring further adverse advances and challenges by rising China and resurgent Russia. Additionally, U.S. influence on key areas of Russia-China cooperation, notably sales of advanced weapons, energy related trade and investment, and cooperation in the United Nations and elsewhere against various Western initiatives, is low.

While the drivers of Russian-Sino cooperation overshadow the brakes on forward movement at America’s expense, there remain limits on partnership between the two. The two governments continue to eschew the commitments of a formal alliance. And, up to this point, it has been hard to find instances when Russia took substantial risks in support of China’s serious challenges to the U.S. that did not involve overlapping Russian interests, and vice versa.

Meanwhile, much of Sino-Russian cooperation depends on circumstances subject to change. The bilateral relationship focuses on overlapping interests and converging outlooks of the authoritarian rulers in Beijing and Moscow. Though not discussed prominently, there is full awareness on both sides that today’s bonhomie follows decades of acute Cold War

hostilities. At that time, Moscow was the dominant power pressing Beijing to defer. Today, the tables have turned. Russia, with national wealth only one tenth the size of China's increasingly modern economy, is ever more dependent on China. This reality severely undercuts Putin's goal, widely supported in Russia, of reestablishing Moscow's great power status.

U.S. Hardening toward Russia and China and Dynamics in Korea

Apart from the above noted Trump government pressure followed by thaw in dealing with North Korea, the main circumstance influencing Chinese and Russian policy in the Korean Peninsula is the Trump government's harder line toward Moscow and Beijing. At the outset of the administration, the American posture was strongly opposed to Russian policy and practice. Moscow's hopes that Trump's personal regard for Putin would ease American sanctions and pressures faded with stepped up U.S. sanctions strongly pushed by Congress amid arguments over Russia's attempted assassination of opponents abroad, military threats to Ukraine, and violations of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces agreement. The Trump government's first year also involved strong pressure on Beijing to compel Pyongyang to halt nuclear weapons and related ballistic missile tests, but it was offset by concurrent amicable interaction between Trump and his Chinese counterpart Xi. The U.S. government's much harder line toward China and China-Russia cooperation became more apparent with the National Security Strategy of December 2017 that gave Beijing and Moscow the first and second positions as America's major international dangers; the two were listed together 30 times as America's "strategic rivals."⁵

Trump continued to value his friendship with Xi and avoided repeating the language of his administration's stated strategy; his cabinet had a hard time agreeing on what to do about China's challenges, especially over economic matters and trade. By mid-2018, however, the president decided to begin punitive tariffs that had a significant impact on China's economy, and he signed a broadly supported National Defense Authorization Act in August 2018 with numerous provisions strongly supported by bipartisan leaders in both chambers of Congress, striking back against perceived Chinese challenges on trade, investment, high technology espionage, theft and transfer, information operations in the U.S., and Chinese pressures and assertiveness in the South China Sea and toward Taiwan. His administration told the media and the American public that the U.S. government was initiating an across-the-board effort to publicly demonstrate its resolve to check and counter Chinese challenges in a wide range of sensitive policy areas.⁶

China-Russia Convergence on Korean Issues

The policy priorities of China and Russia on the Korean Peninsula overlap significantly even though the region is much more important for China's security and development than it is for Russia. Apart from Taiwan, there is no more important area along Beijing's periphery—the longstanding focus on Chinese foreign and security policy—than the Korean Peninsula. What happens in Korea directly impacts China's longstanding efforts to offset the security threat posed by the large American security presence along China's all-important maritime

frontier. Serious disruption in Korea would have a large impact on the adjoining Chinese provinces that are critically important in Beijing's economic development. It would cast a pall over China's broader plans for economic development. Economic progress is the key element supporting the legitimacy of continued Communist Party rule in China and essential for the Xi government's headlong quest for wealth and power to restore Chinese greatness, often called the "China Dream."⁷

A bottom line among Chinese interests in Korea is preserving stability. Optimally, Beijing seeks to sustain and develop the independent North Korean state through economic reforms and international outreach that would preserve the advantages China sees in division of the peninsula rather than risking the very negative consequences and disruptions that regime change in Pyongyang could involve.

Obviously, North Korea's determined march forward in developing nuclear weapons poses a security danger for China and causes repeated disruptions in regional stability. It also affronts the UN Security Council and prompts broad international condemnation; China agrees with UN Security Council condemnations of and sanctions against North Korean provocations. Nevertheless, in the face of U.S.-backed pressure on North Korea to end its nuclear weapons program and related ballistic missile development, China tends to focus on ways to preserve the Korean Peninsula's stability that work against such disruptive interventions and sustain and advance Chinese advantages in relations with North Korea. In this process, Beijing at various times has seen South Korea more willing than the U.S. to support more positive engagement and less confrontation with North Korea, which China supports. Beijing has sought to work more closely with Seoul in those instances, often in ways that divide Seoul from Washington and weaken America's influence. China and South Korea have also developed extensive economic connections that Beijing seeks to preserve and enhance by fostering the peninsula's stability; it also uses the economic ties as leverage to influence and sometimes heavily pressure the South Korean government to avoid closer alignment with the U.S.⁸

On specific issues regarding the crisis posed by North Korea's weapons development, China rejects criticism that it has enabled North Korea through economic support and diplomatic protection from proposed harsher world sanctions. The surprise thaw leading to the June 2018 U.S.-North Korea summit seemed to put at risk Chinese interests and influence. A possible U.S.-North Korean reconciliation could marginalize China and work against Beijing in this area of major importance for Chinese interests. Chinese leaders have been well aware that North Korean officials repeatedly have demonstrated antagonism to China when they have interacted privately with American officials. North Korea has a long history of maneuvering among larger powers, seeking to maximize benefit. A North Korean-American reconciliation could result in much stronger North Korean independence backed by the U.S. that could seriously complicate China's ambitions for greater power and influence in Northeast Asia.

Such calculations seemed behind Xi's abrupt shift away from his wariness toward Kim Jong-un in recent years. China supported North Korea during the sensitive period of succession with the failing health and death of Kim Jong-il leading to ascension of an inexperienced leader, Kim Jong-un, in 2011. Subsequently, Xi and his government came to avoid close association with and support for North Korea, especially following Kim Jong-un's execution

of his powerful uncle Jang Song-thaek, known to have close ties with China, in 2013. And the younger Kim continued high profile pursuit of weapons of mass destruction despite Chinese warnings against such disruptive behavior.⁹

But with the thaw leading to the North Korea-U.S. summit in 2018, Xi and his government moved quickly and effectively to show greater support for the North Korean leader. China eased implementation of sanctions in exchange for less confrontational and more cooperative North Korean behavior. Beijing provided leverage and backing as North Korean leaders dealt with Trump. Xi held four summits with Kim in the following year, all involving the North Korean leader coming to China, seeking Beijing's cooperation. Xi reportedly plans to visit North Korea for the first time later this year.

Meanwhile, amid the crisis atmosphere caused by North Korea's provocative weapons development and the strident reactions of the Trump administration came developments showing in various ways China's sensitivity to North Korean contingencies. The reported possible contamination and/or collapse of North Korea's nuclear testing site led to alarm in adjoining Chinese provinces. Also alarming were heated exchanges in 2017 between Trump and Kim Jong-un forecasting possible all-out war. To prepare for massive refugee flows in the event of a conflict or collapse of the North Korean state, Chinese government planning reportedly involved construction of refugee centers. There were also plans to take control over North Korean weapons of mass destruction (WMD) installations, and limited discussions with U.S. officials about how to deal with a possible North Korean government collapse.¹⁰

In the face of unprecedented U.S. pressure on China to do more to halt North Korea's WMD development in 2017, China seemed to cooperate with the U.S. and adopt more stringent sanctions; but, as noted above, China relaxed the sanctions as North Korea moved toward moderation and China sought better relations with Pyongyang in 2018. Adding to reasons for China's reduced support for U.S. pressure on Pyongyang were U.S. punitive tariffs and other American affronts against perceived Chinese challenges in 2018. In sum, Chinese behavior at times shows interests that overlap with those of the U.S. in seeking denuclearization of North Korea and reduction of threats and aggression from Pyongyang. But overall, the evidence seems to support assessments that Beijing gives top priority to preserving its interests in Korea that work against the influence and actions of the U.S.

Regarding China's relations with South Korea, the thaw in North Korean behavior also led to increased Chinese coordination with South Korean president Moon Jae-in, with the two sides often agreeing on more moderate policies toward North Korea than the tougher Trump administration policy. However, the significance of the common ground on North Korea seemed diluted by the backwash of the acute dispute between the two countries over the deployment in 2017 of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea and China's unofficial, but nonetheless very damaging, economic sanctions against South Korean businesses. In what appeared to be the result of hard bargaining, Beijing and Seoul negotiated at least a pause in their dispute over THAAD. The THAAD system remained in South Korea, the Chinese sanctions ended, and Moon pledged the "three nos"—1) no additional THAAD deployments in South Korea, 2) no participation in a U.S.-led strategic missile defense system, and 3) no creation of a South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral military alliance.¹¹

Russia's behavior toward the Korean Peninsula reflects China's ever-growing importance for Russian foreign policy. As Korea is vital for China's security and developments, the Putin government has tailored its approach to the region in ways that enhance Russia's alignment and avoid serious friction with China. The result over the past two years has been collaborative Russian-Chinese efforts pursuing interests at odds with the U.S. They are explained below. Other Russian interests in Korea include supporting nuclear non-proliferation, avoiding war on Russian borders, pursuing economic benefits, and enhancing great-power prestige, notably continuing Russian involvement in multilateral efforts dealing with the North Korean nuclear weapons crisis and broader security in northeastern Asia.¹²

Regarding denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, Russia doubts the overall effectiveness of sanctions but supports them at times, notably if they discourage or otherwise offset U.S. military buildup or attack near its borders.¹³ Russia's interest in actually settling the North Korea nuclear crisis may be stronger than China's because such an accord seems important for the Putin government's economic agenda in the Russian Far East. The plan proposes trilateral economic and energy cooperation with North and South Korea. It also includes a project to create a rail hub in the North Korean port of Rajin, with a connection to Europe via the Trans-Siberian railroad. Additionally, Russia has long been interested in constructing a trilateral gas pipeline connecting North and South Korea.¹⁴

Russia's relations with North Korea in recent years have continued to improve, even when China's relations with Pyongyang declined. North Korea's support for Russia in the UN after the invasion of Crimea led to a reassessment of North Korea's value as a partner. As China in 2017 used economic leverage against North Korea, Russia avoided such pressure, smuggled oil to North Korea, and improved its political relations with Kim's regime. Nevertheless, despite many invitations, Kim was slow to visit Russia. Meanwhile, South Korea was the only U.S. ally which did not impose sanctions on Russia in 2014. While Russia joined China in opposing the U.S. THAAD anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea, it avoided following Beijing in imposing economic sanctions against Seoul. Perhaps of some significance was the fact that Moon's visit to Moscow and summit with Putin in June 2018 appeared friendlier than Moon's visit with Xi in Beijing six months earlier against the background of the dispute over the U.S. deployment of the THAAD anti-missile system in South Korea.¹⁵

Meanwhile, Russia sustains ambitions to play a leading role in the North Korean nuclear crisis as part of the country's overall effort to enhance its profile in East Asia. It encourages the use of multilateral frameworks such as the lapsed Six-Party Talks as a means of making its own contributions more relevant and contributing toward the development of a new regional security architecture, in which it would play a key role. While careful not to offend Russia, Chinese officials typically deal with the emerging reality that the U.S. and China are the leading powers involved in dealing with Korean Peninsula issues. Overall, despite various incentives and positive opportunities for Russia to advance influence on the peninsula while China faces some problems, in practice Moscow scrupulously avoids steps that would potentially upset its leading strategic partner.

Instances of China-Russia Cooperation Challenging America

Artyom Lukin and other close observers of Russian foreign policy in Asia have been impressed by a pattern of Russian behavior over the past several years showing deference to China's concerns and seeking cooperation with Beijing on the Korean Peninsula. After the end of the Cold War, Russia took a back seat to China regarding North Korea. During discussions on the North Korean misbehavior in the UN, Moscow usually let Beijing do the job of advocating for Pyongyang. A major deterioration in Chinese relations with North Korea followed the 2013 execution of Jang Song-thaek, who was considered China's closest ally in the North Korean leadership, and lasted until the thaw in North Korea's stance and the related summits of 2018. This prolonged deterioration of North Korean-Chinese relations raised the possibility of Moscow advancing its influence in North Korea as China's declined. The North in this period displayed interest in moving away from China. In 2017, there were direct rhetorical attacks on China by North Korean media, accompanied by Pyongyang's de facto boycott of high-level political contacts with Beijing. For its part, China backed the U.S.-initiated sanctions resolutions against North Korea at the UN Security Council and began to enforce them more fully, squeezing the North Korean economy hard. In contrast, Russia was the least criticized by Pyongyang among the major powers involved in Korean affairs; Russian-North Korean diplomatic exchanges remained active. Discussion of sanctions against Pyongyang at the UN Security Council in this period saw Russia, rather than China, as a stronger advocate for softening the penalties.¹⁶

Against this background, Russia, nonetheless, demonstrated little inclination to expand its role at China's expense and, in fact, took steps to advance coordination with China. A Russia-China vice-ministerial dialogue on security in Northeast Asia, centered on Korean issues, began regularly scheduled meetings in 2015;¹⁷ they involved representatives from both sides' defense and foreign ministries.¹⁸

Evidence of closer Russian-Chinese collaboration against American interests on the Korean Peninsula was strongly evident in 2017. In March, China outlined a "suspension for suspension" plan that became known as the "double freeze" proposal. According to this plan, North Korea would suspend its nuclear and missile tests if the U.S. and South Korea would suspend their military exercises.¹⁹ After Moon took office in Seoul in May, Russia sought to capitalize on the new leader's interest in improving North-South relations to propose new diplomatic efforts toward denuclearization. The steps reflected past Russian plans for a settlement, including rejecting the use of force and unilateral sanctions, addressing the US military presence in Northeast Asia along with the North Korean weapons programs, and creating a new security architecture.²⁰

Moscow and Beijing announced their unified position on the North Korea crisis during the summit between Putin and Xi in Moscow on July 4. The two leaders combined previous Chinese proposals of the "double freeze" (the halt of nuclear and missile programs by the North in exchange for suspension of massive U.S.-North Korea military drills) and

“parallel advancement” (simultaneous talks on denuclearization and the creation of peace mechanisms on the peninsula) with the Russian-proposed stage-by-stage Korean settlement plan. It was the first time that China and Russia so clearly articulated their common position with respect to North Korea. Indeed, it marked the first joint position the two countries have taken on an international issue.²¹

Moscow and Beijing now explicitly linked the resolution of the North Korea problem with America’s willingness to make major strategic concessions in Northeast Asia. Aiming at the U.S. alliances with South Korea and Japan, Russia and China insisted that “allied relations between separate states should not inflict damage on the interests of ‘third parties’” and expressed opposition to “any military presence of extra-regional forces in Northeast Asia” as well as “the deployment of THAAD antimissile systems.”²² In sum, China and Russia sought to weaken the U.S. position in Northeast Asia, at least with respect to the Korean Peninsula and the U.S.-South Korea alliance.

A seemingly contrary development came when Russia, to the surprise of many observers, supported the strict sanctions punishing North Korea for nuclear and missile testing that were backed by the U.S. in the UN Security Council in September and December 2017. Russia’s support came even though Moscow previously insisted that pressure through sanctions was not effective. However, the analysis of Artyom Lukin showed that the cooperation stemmed from pressure by Beijing to support the sanctions. Beijing’s persuasion and not U.S. concerns reportedly drove the unusually accommodating Russian position.²³

Regarding trade with and the impact of sanctions on North Korea, China and Russia seemed roughly in line with their respective mixed record in supporting U.S.-backed sanctions curbing trade with North Korea because of its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development. In recent years, China reportedly provided 500,000 metric tons of crude oil and 270,000 metric tons of oil products annually; Russia sold 200,000-300,000 metric tons of gasoline and diesel fuel, valued at close to \$300 million.²⁴ The U.S. in 2018 accused Russian companies of undermining economic sanctions by transferring fuel oil to North Korean tankers on the high seas, thereby violating the cap on fuel deliveries. Russia denied the U.S. allegations. Moscow also worked to prevent the publication of a UN report detailing how Russian and Chinese front companies violated the sanctions.²⁵ It showed how Chinese companies were instrumental in facilitating black market trade as well as illicit financial transactions.²⁶ China, which accounts for 90% of North Korea’s foreign trade, reportedly enforced sanctions more strictly at various times, to show its displeasure at certain North Korean actions opposed by China.²⁷

China and Russia both opposed the deployment by U.S. forces in South Korea of THAAD to counter the North Korean threat. Speaking separately and together, Chinese and Russian officials made clear that they saw the move as counterproductive to regional stability and harmful to their respective security interests. Chinese officials reacted particularly strongly to the April 2017 deployment, going so far as to take ostensibly unofficial economic counter-measures against South Korea, one of China’s top economic partners, due to the potential impact of THAAD on China’s second-strike capability.²⁸ Restrictions on Chinese tourists visiting South Korea, the closing of some operations, and a widespread boycott of

South Korean products by Chinese consumers cost the South Korean economy as much as \$7.5 billion in sales in 2017.²⁹ Russia did not employ sanctions or other pressures against South Korea.

Chinese officials fear that THAAD could be configured in such a way as to cover missile launches from deep inside China.³⁰ Although THAAD would not imperil Russia's deterrent, located out of the system's range, Russian officials, like their Chinese counterparts, oppose measures that strengthen the U.S. military presence around their national borders. China and Russia previously issued joint statements opposing the U.S. deployment of missile defense systems globally.³¹ In their joint statement in July 2017, Putin and Xi said that tensions on the Korean Peninsula should not be used as a pretext for expanded U.S. military capabilities and opposed THAAD as detrimental to their own security interests and ineffective in achieving North Korea's denuclearization or stability in Northeast Asia.³²

The coming to power of Moon and his progressive allies, traditionally more accommodating of China and Russia than the outgoing conservative party leaders, saw improved South Korean relations with Russia. Negotiations by the end of the year led to a South Korean arrangement with China that eased tensions over the THAAD issue and may have ended the unofficial Chinese economic sanctions and boycotts directed against South Korean businesses. As noted above, South Korea moved forward with the initial THAAD deployment, but Moon also agreed to China's "three nos" with hope that the economic sanctions would be lifted and bilateral ties put back on track.³³

While China and Russia have called for a freeze on U.S.-South Korean military exercises in exchange for a moratorium on North Korean weapons testing, the massive Russian-Chinese Vostok exercises in September 2018 discussed above have indirect but important implications demonstrating Russian-Chinese military cooperation and resolve against the U.S. in Asia. Other military cooperation with implications for a conflict in Korea include two sets of computer simulated exercises to practice missile defense. One set of exercises was called Air and Space Security 2016, held in May 2016 at the Russian Defense Ministry's Aerospace Defense Force in Moscow.³⁴ A second set of exercises was held in Beijing in December 2017 to simulate joint missile defense operations.³⁵ China and Russia have also held three sets of naval exercises in waters near the Korean Peninsula, the first in 2005, as a part of the initial joint Sino-Russian Peace Mission series of exercises and then as part of joint naval exercises in 2012 and 2017. Nonetheless, the missions involved were not clearly linked to Korean Peninsula security threats. The location of the 2005 exercise was a compromise choice and actually focused on a Taiwan scenario. The two later sets of exercises focused on emergency rescue missions.

Recent Developments and Uncertain Outlook

In 2018, the situation on the Korean Peninsula changed dramatically. North Korea's Kim began his charm offensive directed at Seoul and Washington and markedly improved relations with Xi Jinping. Since March 2018 Kim has had three summits with Moon Jae-in, four with Xi, and two summits with Trump. Russia and Japan have been marginalized from the process of seeking peace on the peninsula and a new order in Northeast Asia. A summit

between Putin and Kim, although agreed in principle in May 2018, finally happened in April 2019. Up until that point, negotiations on Korean affairs had been a four-party process—North Korea, South Korea, the U.S., and China.

Artyom Lukin rightly emphasizes that Moscow continues its overall deference to China on Korean issues.³⁶ It sustains collaborative efforts with Beijing in thwarting American pressures and influence. Top Russian officials, including Putin, repeatedly praise China as the leading contributor to the diplomatic progress on the peninsula.³⁷ Russian diplomats say they are closely collaborating with Beijing.³⁸ If North Korea has been the primary test of the U.S.-China-Russia strategic triangle in Asia, then Gilbert Rozman seems correct when he points out that Russia has sided with China.³⁹ In sum, the recent record strongly indicates that Moscow, even with the Vladivostok summit, is more focused on weakening American influence than in taking substantial initiatives on the peninsula that would run against the basic interests of China, its main strategic partner. The Russian government is well aware that Korea is vital for China's security and recognizes that Beijing's stakes in the Korean Peninsula are significantly higher than Moscow's.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the combination of the Xi-Kim rapprochement with the already cordial Russia-North Korea relations led to tentative institutionalization of a Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang bloc. In October 2018, Russia, China, and North Korea, represented by deputy foreign ministers, held in Moscow their first ever official trilateral meeting. Their joint statement called for the easing of the UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea to reward Pyongyang for its efforts at denuclearization. The statement also called for phased and synchronized reciprocal steps by the U.S., North Korea, and other states involved in the Korean peace process.⁴¹ In effect, this formula reiterated Pyongyang's long-held mantra backed by China and Russia, and contradicted the U.S. stance that any significant rewards to North Korea, such as the removal of sanctions and the signing of a peace treaty, can only happen after North Korea's full denuclearization. In another jab at the U.S., the three sides denounced unilateral sanctions. According to some experts, the recent Russia-China-North Korea coalition recalls the 1950s, when the three countries were communist allies against the U.S. Of course, at present, Beijing rather than Moscow is the leader in this group.

In sum, the diplomatic alignment of Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang currently stands in opposition to American strategic goals in Northeast Asia. However, the situation on the Korean Peninsula remains in flux; it is too early to assess how viable and durable this coalition will be. Beijing and Moscow work together and with others, including North Korea, in thwarting U.S. pressures and influence on the peninsula, presumably with an aim of diminishing American strategic dominance in Northeast Asia.

However, whether or not North Korea is committed to such an anti-U.S. effort remains to be seen. Kim reportedly seeks a grand bargain with Washington that would normalize North Korea's relations with the U.S. while leaving North Korea as a *de facto* nuclear power. Given its troubled relations with China until very recently, Pyongyang seeking rapprochement with U.S. could imply North Korea welcoming American influence, perhaps including U.S. forces in Northeast Asia, as a hedge against rising Chinese dominance. Of course, North Korea also has longstanding opposition to the U.S. security presence on the peninsula and U.S. alliances with South Korea and Japan. Whether these would be put aside or played down by Pyongyang in the interests of the above rapprochement with the U.S. remains an open question.

Thus, North Korea could see its interests well served in a deal with the U.S. that curbs its ICBM forces and nuclear weapons testing while retaining its nuclear weapons capacity, especially if accompanied by positive engagement from the U.S. and perhaps allies South Korea and Japan. Meanwhile, the rising tensions in American relations with China could cause U.S. leaders to see a nuclear North Korea as an important asset in curbing Chinese ambitions for Asian dominance. It is widely assessed that strategically, North Korea may well become like China in the Cold War and Vietnam more recently, a country that used to be a bitter enemy of the U.S. but became a close partner and friend because of a changed geopolitical context.⁴² Given North Korea's longstanding practice of maneuvering for advantage among competing larger powers, the above scenario is just one of several possible outcomes, but the current flux among concerned powers on the peninsula argues for an American policy that fully considers heretofore shunned options given the changing circumstances.

Endnotes

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- ⁹ For reviews and updates on China-North Korean relations, see among others Scott Snyder's reviews every four months in *Comparative Connections* and Yun Sun's commentaries published by *38 North* and available at <https://www.38north.org/author/yun-sun/> (accessed January 27, 2019).
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