

The North Korean Factor in the Sino-Russian Alliance

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The Kim-Putin summit in April 2019 and the abortive Trump-Kim summit in February 2019 compel us to review Korean issues from the regional security standpoint, rather than primarily as a proliferation question. Despite apparent failure of the Trump-Kim summit, the search for denuclearization and peace in Korea will continue.¹ North Korea is obviously resuming discussions with Russia and China to decide their future course of action, inasmuch as Kim went to Vladivostok.² The summit with Putin in April only reinforced those considerations, as it is clear from the subsequent press conference that Kim asked Putin to transmit his views to Washington and that Putin agreed to do so.³ Likewise, Washington must rethink its approach. Instead of emphasizing denuclearization, Washington would likely benefit from viewing Korean issues primarily as regional security questions.⁴ Certainly, Russia and China do so. Therefore, rethinking Russo-Chinese ties to North Korea offers valuable insights in the quest for a lasting Korean peace, especially as Russia and China have become allies.⁵ The argument of a Sino-Russian alliance is admittedly a minority view among scholars, but the mounting evidence of their alliance is apparent not only in regard to Korea—as the other chapters in this collection show—but in larger military-political affairs as well.⁶

In 2017, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu called Korea a strategically important region for Russia.⁷ More recently, immediately after the summit with Kim, Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, contended that North Korea is not only a neighboring country, but it is part of "our region"—not America's.⁸ This is a claim having special emotional resonance to Russians, almost as if North Korea was as important as Ukraine or Kazakhstan. Obviously, it is also a strategic region for China. Indeed, for both governments it is essential to be recognized as major if not dominant actors on the Korean Peninsula. Putin's reiteration of long-standing Russian proposals for multilateral security guarantees for North Korea points to their desire to establish such guarantees as a way to include Russia as a major regional actor, as does Peskov's statement.⁹ If their ability to influence developments on their immediate periphery is diminished, that reduces their ability to play a global great power role.¹⁰ Russia views Korea through the perspectives of regional security and its relationship with Washington.¹¹ China's regional focus and priority focus on America are equally well established. As Bonnie Glazer observes, "The Chinese have always looked at North Korea through the lens of their competition with the United States, so they want to make sure their interests are protected."¹² South Korean diplomats similarly comment that in private Chinese diplomats focus on the U.S.¹³

Since Korea facilitated Soviet-Chinese alliance dynamics during the Korean War, the recurrence of those dynamics regarding North Korea is not surprising. Thus, the summit clearly indicated that Russia is in no position to launch independent initiatives regarding North Korea, as there was no joint agreement even on economic issues, although they were discussed.¹⁴ Not only did Putin immediately brief Chinese President Xi Jinping on the summit, in advance of the summit, Kim also fulsomely praised the trust and friendship of North Korea with China, a departure from the way things had gone prior to 2018.¹⁵ In Beijing, Putin then claimed that Sino-Russian relations were now the best they had ever been in history.¹⁶ The newest round of Sino-Russian naval drills began immediately after the Belt and Road Conference in Beijing, where Putin spoke. These signs of alliance dynamics give reason to believe that Russia's Vostok-2018 exercise, that also involved Chinese forces, originally reflected apprehension about a U.S. strike on North Korea that could oblige them to respond.¹⁷ Similarly, the overall schedule of Sino-Russian military exercises of 2017-2018

was probably conceived and implemented to thwart a U.S.-led invasion of North Korea.¹⁸ Sino-Russian naval exercises in the Sea of Japan in 2017 point to the intention to prevent U.S. naval forces concentrated near Korea from attaining total dominance in the theater.¹⁹ This schedule of exercises also included joint air and missile defense exercises, to make a similar impression on U.S. air forces. These latter exercises also suggest an alliance, because both sides must put their cards on the table and display their C4ISR.²⁰ As Vasily Kashin notes, the air and missile defense exercises took the form of a computer simulation. Both sides constructed a joint air/missile defense area using long-range SAM systems like the Chinese HQ-9 and the Russian S-300/400 series.²¹ But the fact of continuing exercises, as is now the case, suggests a deepening of this alliance, not least in the military sphere.²²

Whereas China's large role in North Korea is well known; we cannot overlook Russia's consistent efforts to strengthen Russo-North Korean ties since 2000. Russian policy has been based on the belief that without strong ties to both Koreas, Russia will be marginalized in Northeast Asia. Thus, Russia secretly offered North Korea a nuclear power plant from which it would remove the spent fuel to supervise denuclearization and enhance its own influence in North Korea and upon the overall process.²³ Nevertheless, Russia indisputably now plays "second fiddle" to China on Korean issues.²⁴ Moreover, it appears content to do so even as it strives for continuing influence and status there.²⁵ And the summit with Kim confirmed these conclusions.

Alliance and Bipolarity

In 2015 Sergei Radchenko wrote,

The argument for China-Russia-DPRK triangle in Northeast Asia hinges on the idea that the three countries are willing to coordinate their actions on the international stage, adopt similar positions on key regional questions, and develop trilateral cooperation in economic or military spheres.²⁶

At that time, Radchenko denied that these powers were or could be allies.²⁷ However, an alliance meeting those criteria, albeit an informal one unlike the U.S. alliance system in Asia, NATO, or other, earlier cases of alliances, has emerged. Although most analysts still argue that Russia and China are not allies; some do argue for a Sino-Russian alliance.²⁸ Artem Lukin, Rens Lee, Gilbert Rozman, and Alexander Korolev all believe the evidence clearly shows an evolving Chinese-dominated alliance featuring ideological or normative and strategic congruence.²⁹ More importantly, this relationship's reality supersedes whatever label is attached to it. Thus, Dmitri Trenin admits that China gets most, if not all, that it wants from Russia without a formal alliance.³⁰ Moreover, we must view this alliance not like NATO, which is a formal alliance, but as what Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov calls network alliances,

If we talk about alliances, not in the old sense of the word, not in the sense of tough bloc discipline when NATO was against the Warsaw Pact and everyone knew that this part of the negotiating table would raise their hands and this part would vote against it. Today such discipline looks humiliating to states that preach democracy, pluralism of thought, and so on. Other types of alliances—flexible network alliances—are much more in demand today.³¹

Following Lavrov, Moscow and Beijing readily proclaim that they coordinate their global actions, and their observations about this relationship confirm that it is a de facto, albeit informal, alliance. Recently, a joint Russo-Chinese expert dialogue argued that the parties have attained a level of interaction exceeding a strategic partnership and surpassing an alliance. Both sides retain full freedom in relations with third countries “except in circumstances where such relations might violate certain obligations of the existing partnership.” Meanwhile, in the bilateral relationship’s intensiveness, level of trust, depth, and effectiveness, Sino-Russian ties supposedly are superior to an alliance.³² Furthermore, this partnership allegedly has more potential to act “as an independent geopolitical power and deter political adversaries.” Finally, both parties have successfully adapted their cooperation “to resolve any global or regional task” while preserving their swift decision-making, tactical flexibility, and strategic stability.³³

In Korea, alliance behavior and dynamics, as defined by Radchenko, are clearly occurring. Beyond the general Sino-Russian normative consensus, as regards Korea both states share strategic political and military perspectives. Russia still identifies with China’s approach of blaming the U.S., seeking mitigating excuses for North Korean behavior, and justifying that behavior by invoking U.S. threats.³⁴ Thus, Putin told the press after the 2017 APEC summit that,

Concerning foreign policy, our position, as diplomats are known to say, are very close or coincide on many issues, and they certainly do on the key ones. One such key issue today is the North Korean problem. Our views completely overlap here.³⁵

And at the summit and ensuing press conference, Putin made clear that Russia and North Korea regarded the U.S. as a kind of rogue power that was violating international law and throwing its weight around to bully Pyongyang.³⁶ Similarly, China and Russia continue flouting UN sanctions on North Korea that they had previously supported. Russia has doubled gas and oil exports to the DPRK since 2017, while China has transferred oil to North Korean tankers, and since the first Kim-Trump summit, both sides urge easing if not removing sanctions.³⁷ In fact, in 2017-2018, despite voting for new UN sanctions on North Korea, Beijing increased covert economic aid for “daily life and infrastructure building” as well as “defensive military construction” and “high level military science and technology” to Korea. The weaponry involved included “more advanced mid-and short-range ballistic missiles, cluster munitions, etc.”³⁸ Russia’s military has long advocated an alliance with China, obviously with Putin’s support.³⁹ Michael Yahuda also observes that Russian elites very much favor enhanced collaboration.

Moscow believes that bolstering China’s military position in East Asia is very much in Russian interests. As the official in charge of Russian arms exports stated in April 2015, “if we work in China’s interests, that means we also work in our interests.” In other words, the U.S.-led economic sanctions on Russia have made Sino-Russian strategic interests more congruent.⁴⁰

Finally, both governments openly support North Korea’s negotiating position of phased, synchronous, bilateral concessions. Moreover, at the summit, Putin not only reiterated his demand for multilateral security guarantees for the DPRK as a precondition of its denuclearization, his defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, meeting with his counterpart, No

Kwang-Chol, stated that Russia was interested in expanding defense cooperation with North Korea.⁴¹ Normally this means arms sales or joint exercises or both. At the same time, he said that military ties with China had reached an "unprecedented" level.⁴² There were attempts to revive such cooperation immediately after the Medvedev-Kim Jong-il agreements in 2011, but those went nowhere. If Moscow were to engage in joint military drills with North Korea alone or together with China, or sell weapons to North Korea, that would effectively confirm its fundamental anti-Americanism with regard to North Korea, even though Putin stated that Russia and the U.S. actually had some shared interests here, i.e. denuclearization and peace.⁴³

Moreover, on October 9, 2018, following the latest visit of U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to North Korea, deputy foreign ministers of Russia, China, and North Korea — Igor Morgulov of Russia, Kong Xuanyou of China, and Choe Son Hui of North Korea— gathered for the first time in Moscow to discuss easing sanctions on North Korea. Summarizing the meetings, Morgulov, stated in a TASS interview that "measures" should reflect "reciprocity, and parallel, synchronous and gradual steps" and emphasized that the situation on the Korean Peninsula would be settled in "accordance with the Russian-Chinese roadmap."⁴⁴

Xi Jinping has subsequently stated that, "the legitimate issues raised by the DPRK are rightful demands, and that he fully agrees that the DPRK's reasonable interests should be justly resolved."⁴⁵ Consequently, if China is encouraging North Korea to resist U.S. pressure for denuclearization as Trump has suggested, Russia is also probably coordinating with China.⁴⁶ Alternatively, if China is "compartmentalizing" its Korea policy and supporting denuclearization despite its other differences with Washington, as Ambassador Stephen Biegun has said, Russia is likely following suit.⁴⁷ But the failure in Hanoi and recent North Korean statements suggest that "the gloves are coming off."⁴⁸ Increasingly, Russian analyses of the Korean issue follow China in blaming Washington's threats for North Korean nuclearization as did Putin at the summit.⁴⁹

Therefore, Russia and China still argue, much to Pyongyang's delight, that Washington must initiate concessions, e.g. formally ending the Korean War, reducing sanctions, giving security guarantees, and ceasing its threats while deferring denuclearization.⁵⁰ Moscow also showed visible pleasure that the 2018 Singapore summit corresponded to their and Beijing's proposal (largely a Chinese initiative) of a double freeze or roadmap: North Korea freezing nuclear tests in return for a freeze on U.S.-ROK exercises.⁵¹ Later, Russia's media responded to the failure in Hanoi by mocking the U.S.⁵²

These synchronized and concerted behaviors display the military-economic-political parameters of an alliance regarding North Korea if not other international security issues. Consequently, the behavior and interactive dynamics of these three parties raises the issue of whether the Northern Alliance and ensuing bipolarity that characterized the Cold War are returning to Northeast Asia, albeit in altered and looser form. Some observers warned years ago of a drift towards strategic bipolarity in Northeast Asia, with the U.S. alliance system confronting a reconstituted version of the Cold War alliance of Russia, China, and the DPRK. South Korean columnist, Kim Yo'ng Hu'i, wrote in 2005,

China and Russia are reviving their past strategic partnership to face their strongest rival, the United States. A structure of strategic competition and confrontation between the United States and India on the one side, and Russia and China on the other is unfolding in the eastern half of the Eurasian continent including the Korean peninsula. Such a situation will definitely bring a huge wave of shock to the Korean peninsula, directly dealing with the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces in Korea. If China and Russia train their military forces together in the sea off the coast of China's Liaodong Peninsula, it will also have an effect on the 21st century strategic plan of Korea. We will now need to think of Northeast Asia on a much broader scale. The eastern half of Eurasia, including Central Asia, has to be included in our strategic plan for the future.⁵³

Subsequently, Lyle Goldstein and Vitaly Kozyrev warned that "From the standpoint of global politics, the formation of a Sino-Russian energy nexus would represent a strong consolidation of an emergent bipolar structure in East Asia, with one pole led by China (and including Russia) and one led by the United States (and including Japan)."⁵⁴

Likewise, this author observed in 2011 that repeated references in Sino-Russian meetings to policy convergence showed their identity of interests.⁵⁵

Xi Jinping's subsequent invitation to Russia to work more closely with China on Asian security and stability issues and signs of such cooperation suggest why Pyongyang might see a common anti-Americanism in their positions.⁵⁶ Indeed, Russian analysts, probably echoing official positions, argue that Washington cannot make any concessions that would induce North Korea to denuclearize. Therefore, the DPRK should retain at least some nuclear weapons for years to come, a sure way to torpedo the current negotiations.⁵⁷ This position clearly suits China too, as shown by its support for North Korea's negotiating stance. And China clearly prefers a nuclear North Korea to a destabilized one, which it apparently sees as the only alternative to the current status quo.⁵⁸ So, they will not lament the failed Hanoi summit.⁵⁹ As long as Russian and Chinese elites blame Washington first, Pyongyang will perceive the reappearance of this Cold War "Northern Alliance," which lets it defy the UN and Washington.

The North Korean Factor in Building the Sino-Russian Alliance

We can identify at least five reasons why North Korea has brought China and Russia closer together, despite three reasons that have been offered for why this should not be occurring. The facilitating factors are: 1) historical great power identity; 2) denial of a U.S. identity victory seen as a "color revolution"; 3) a geopolitical test reshaping the Northeast Asian region in opposition to the U.S. presence and U.S. alliances; 4) each government's view that North Korea can become a strong ally under the right conditions; and 5) positive assumptions in each about economic integration with North Korea if it resolves the nuclear crisis in the right manner, albeit conflicting in some details. The potentially complicating factors to sustaining this alliance are: 1) traditional North Korean tactics to play China off against Russia; 2) Russian concern about China's dominance leaving Russia with little economic benefit or prospects for multipolarity in Northeast Asia; and 3) Chinese insistence

on unilaterally subordinating North Korea to its policies with scant regard for Russia's role. All these factors have appeared intermittently, but in 2018-2019, we see more clearly how they combine to boost Russo-Chinese alliance ties, and the prospects of a three-way alliance.

Putin and Xi share the obsession of constructing a laudatory image of their respective histories. Moscow's cult of World War II already impedes a deal with Japan leading to a peace treaty and the promised return of two Kurile Islands.⁶⁰ Putin is imposing the condition that Japan unreservedly accept Moscow's legal right to these islands through its victory over Japan in 1945.⁶¹ Moscow similarly demands that Japan abjure stationing U.S. IRBMs in Japan, even if targeted against China, another example of alliance dynamics.⁶² Consequently, a deal with Japan seems inconceivable, and recent Russian diplomatic signals tend to confirm this conclusion.⁶³

Similarly, a recent analysis of Russia's global ambitions emphasizes the centrality of Russia's historical and forceful territorial expansion over the centuries. This narrative "make(s) up an integral part of the foundational narrative of the contemporary Russian state." Furthermore, "this legacy provides the justification and the motivation for Russia to pursue its ambitions, not just around its vast periphery, but well beyond its shores."⁶⁴ Obviously, Soviet success in securing North Korea figures prominently in this narrative and in Russian policy. Samuel Ramani argues that, "You can see this in two ways: first, in Russia's attempts to showcase itself as more effective at resolving conflicts in the Korean Peninsula than the United States; and second, in Russia's efforts to lead an international coalition against Washington's coercion of North Korea."⁶⁵ Moreover, as Ivan Krastev observes,

And contrary to conventional wisdom, Russia's craving for global power status is not simply about nostalgia or psychological trauma. It is a geopolitical imperative. Only by proving its capacity to be a 21st century great power, can Russia hope to be a real, equal partner with countries like China, which it needs to take it seriously. Believe it or not, from the Russian perspective, interfering in the American presidential election was a performance organized mostly for the benefit of non-American publics.⁶⁶

He further notes that "If Russia does not gain recognition internationally, this would have repercussions in terms of identity problems and raise questions about the ability of the state to guarantee order and society."⁶⁷

Russian marginalization regarding Korean issues undermines any pretension to being a great Asian power. And the failure to make any independent economic initiatives at the Kim-Putin summit only reinforces that conclusion. Inclusion in any Korean process is important, but represents only part of the larger and increasingly important objective of achieving great power status in Asia. Indeed, Putin's first Asian initiative was to travel to Pyongyang in 2000 to reestablish Russian standing as a valuable interlocutor for North Korea. Putin already understood then that Russian exclusion from the Korean dialogue deprives it of influence over North Korea and marginalizes it in Asia. Thus, Russia's Korea policy is integral to its entire Asia policy and incomprehensible apart from it. Consequently, offering a nuclear power plant indicates Moscow's ambition for a prominent role in Korean affairs.⁶⁸

Even before Xi Jinping took power in 2012, his message on the glory of the Korean War reversed Chinese ambiguity in the 1990s-2000s on the history of this war. Despite tensions between him and Kim Jong-un in 2012-2017, the verdict on Mao Zedong's judgment in fighting this war was reinforced by ever-clearer veneration of Mao's legacy. The place of the Korean War within the Chinese national identity has only intensified. As Suisheng Zhao wrote,

Chinese historical discourse in the twenty-first century has refocused on imperial China and its continuous glory, interrupted only by Western imperialist powers, to advance the claims of China's peaceful rise. This type of connection between imperial China and China's peaceful rise is obviously to serve the political objectives of the Chinese government rather than a reflection of historical facts.⁶⁹

In addition,

Perhaps the most fundamental reason for China's hesitation or "weakness" in its Korea policy (not restraining North Korean nuclearization and adventurism-author) is the important meaning of the Korean War for both Chinese nationalism and the Chinese communist regime's legitimacy. Most Chinese view the war as a victory and a source of national pride; they believe China, although at the cost of huge casualties, won the Korean War and resisted U.S. military offensives. If China totally abandoned the DPRK now, did hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers die in Korea in vain? That would be a vital blow to Chinese nationalism and the Chinese communists' political legitimacy.⁷⁰

Any sign of a North Korean collapse or turn to a more pro-American posture evokes great apprehension in Moscow and Beijing, if not outright panic.⁷¹ Those outcomes powerfully negate the shared Sino-Russian commitment to prevent "color revolutions," especially in countries long aligned with them. Beyond their ideological congruence and self-perception of being geopolitically and ideologically under threat from U.S. power, policy, and values, also lies their shared imperial self-consciousness and inability to conceive of their states as anything other than empires.⁷² Dmitry Gorenburg's review of a book by Bettina Renz quotes and summarizes her views as follows (Renz's words in quotes),

"The Kremlin believes that its sovereignty to conduct internal affairs without outside interference can only be preserved if it can also pursue an independent foreign policy abroad" (p. 34). This linkage of the internal and external components of sovereignty, together with the fear that its adversaries are infringing on its sovereignty through regime change efforts, has resulted in a belief that a strong military is needed to secure Russian sovereignty. The belief that a sphere of influence is a sign of being a great power, together with an understanding of sovereignty as pertaining to great powers but not necessarily to smaller states, encourages Russian political elites to pursue the legacy of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union by seeking to dominate its former territories in the "near abroad," though generally without asserting direct territorial control. Neither can either government fully acknowledge the right of other smaller states.⁷³

China ultimately wants to be the hegemon of the Asia-Pacific region. As Foreign Minister, Yang Jiechi exploded at the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2010, “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact.”⁷⁴ Western analysts have also grasped that ambition and self-perception.

Although China does not want to usurp the United States’ position as the leader of a global order, its actual aim is nearly as consequential. In the Indo-Pacific region, China wants complete dominance; it wants to force the United States out and become the region’s unchallenged political, economic, and military hegemon. And globally, even though it is happy to leave the United States in the driver’s seat, it wants to be powerful enough to counter Washington when needed. As one Chinese official put it to me, “Being a great power means you get to do what you want, and no one can say anything about it.” In other words, China is trying to displace, rather than replace, the United States.⁷⁵

The Chinese cannot conceive that small neighboring states, e.g. North Korea, can have a wholly independent foreign policy, or worse, freely choose an alignment with the U.S. Such decisions are invariably ascribed to external conspiracies. Indeed, anything that challenges their interests, even an accident like the U.S. bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade in 1999, appears as a malevolent and intentional act.⁷⁶ For China, that bombing and the 1989 demonstrations at Tiananmen Square crystallized an evolving belief that the U.S. was indeed an implacable enemy of China’s governing system and great power ambitions.⁷⁷

The obsession with imperial status, history, and ambitions necessitates a corresponding belief that Washington is conducting a perpetual and implacable war against them and their interests to undermine their state and great power ambitions. Whereas Chinese policymakers downplay these perceptions, Russian documents loudly proclaim them.⁷⁸ Consequently, ideological and geopolitical ambitions, especially in Northeast Asia and around Korea, are inextricable and analytically difficult to disentangle. Indeed, if North Korea collapsed or reoriented its policies, they would perceive that as simultaneously an ideological (political) and a strategic loss.

China and Russia are deeply apprehensive that North Korea will make an independent accommodation with the U.S. that marginalizes them. Signs of this fear were acute in 2018 during the first Trump-Kim summit. Russia, China, and Japan were clearly surprised at Washington and Pyongyang’s movement toward the Singapore summit. But whereas Japan has nowhere to go but to Washington, Russia and Beijing have other alternatives. Therefore, the subsequent Russo-Chinese moves toward the U.S. and both Koreas underscore Russian and Chinese efforts to reassert Sino-Russian interests and standing as participants with vital interests in the outcome of any negotiations. Indeed, one Chinese news report openly warned against feeling marginalized.⁷⁹ At one point, even China feared being excluded from peace talks about formally ending the Korean War.⁸⁰ Moscow too clearly worries about a peace process excluding it, i.e. bypassing the six-party process, and scrambles to keep up since that process began.⁸¹ And inasmuch as it has little to offer either Korean state, other than energy, Putin and the Chinese press made a point that Russia’s long-standing quest for a trans-Siberian-trans-Korean railway and gas pipeline (TSR-TKR), along with its proposal to build an integrated Northeast Asian electrical super-grid on the basis of its own electrical and hydro-electric power and energy capabilities are also “in the interests of South Korea.”⁸²

China's recent reassertion of its ties with North Korea may signify its limited power to influence North Korean behavior and is also an attempt to prevent North Korea from making a deal with Washington that would marginalize it. The narrative based on China's importance to Pyongyang and Washington, though it contains much truth, is also quite self-serving. One of the few substantive reactions to the Singapore summit was China's reiteration of its indispensability to any future settlement.⁸³ Frequent reiteration of this point since then should alert us to what is missing in this narrative. Arguably, Beijing "doth protest too much." This clear apprehension of marginalization is another compelling reason for China's repeated summits with North Korea. While Beijing has many means of leverage upon the North, Pyongyang knows that it has been reluctant to employ them fully. Therefore, the narrative of China's indispensability suffers from the fact that China and the DPRK both know this narrative is at some risk. China must construct an elaborate facade to hide its apprehensions while North Korea can now act more freely on its own and evidently wants an American negotiating partner if it can get its terms accepted.⁸⁴

There are also concrete strategic interests at stake. Russo-Chinese anxieties about the military situation around Korea preceded Trump's belligerent policies. The 2016 decision by South Korea to deploy THAAD (Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense) generated a Chinese trade and economic war against South Korea and also enhanced Sino-Russian military coordination. Although this system does not threaten Russia's strategic nuclear forces, Russian officials now claim U.S. policies, e.g. projected space defenses, pose a threat to China.⁸⁵ A 2017 report by Russian and Chinese experts openly stated that, although Moscow's strategic nuclear forces are outside the range of the U.S. THAAD missiles placed in South Korea at Seoul's request, both governments claimed this deployment signified a "changing strategic balance of power in this region," representing a clear threat to China and implicitly to Russia, not just North Korea.⁸⁶ THAAD also allegedly changes the strategic balance of power in Northeast Asia, and from Russia's side generates fears of arms proliferation, namely that the U.S. and its Asian allies could more easily threaten the Russian Far East and Siberia.⁸⁷ The newly released U.S. Missile Defense Review may also heighten their perception of being at risk.⁸⁸

This alliance dynamic also applies to strategic and non-military interests, since both states see North Korea as an important economic partner today and tomorrow. Therefore, failure to resolve North Korea's denuclearization would probably trigger more nuclear and THAAD deployments that greatly alarm both governments and stimulate their joint or coordinated counteraction.⁸⁹ Indeed, Graham Allison observes that,

What has emerged is what a former senior Russian national security official described to me as a "functional military alliance." Russian and Chinese General Staffs now have candid, detailed discussions about the threat U.S. nuclear modernization and missile defenses pose to each of their strategic deterrents.⁹⁰

It is likely that these two militaries also conduct equally probing discussions concerning conventional warfare and Korean issues.⁹¹ Allison's observations reinforce the notion that beyond the bilateral normative convergence concerning international affairs, a shared strategic consensus exists regarding Korea.

Economics

In a more exclusively political and economic context, the successful attraction of North Korea to the U.S. might well have included major American economic investments there, had the Hanoi summit succeeded.⁹² That outcome would have introduced a determined competitor in North Korea to China. Similarly, to the degree that this process entails increased energy shipments to North and South Korea (and South Korea has long sought U.S. energy imports⁹³), that U.S. presence would dramatically reduce Russia's projected main instrument for gaining leverage over either or both Korean states, i.e. the generation-long proposal for a trans-Siberian and trans-Korean gas pipeline (TSR-TKR). If the U.S. can steer the negotiations with the DPRK, this would likely mean preserving a sizable U.S. military presence in South Korea and Japan that Beijing and Moscow see as directed against them. Lastly, to the degree that Washington can successfully steer the negotiations, that outcome would greatly enhance its standing across Asia at China's expense. Thus, both sides see in North Korea an outpost for enhanced commercial and energy ties with Northeast Asia, as well as a link to new economic opportunities in the Arctic. As Alexander Korolev wrote in 2016,

Park's "Eurasian initiative" highlights extending transportation, energy and trade networks that connect the Pacific coast to Europe and its capacity to engage North Korea [and] becomes an indispensable element of this geopolitical model. South Korea's rail network is supposed to be linked with the Trans-Siberian railway, and new energy cooperation must link energy infrastructures, including electricity grids, gas and oil pipelines, and co-developing China's shale gas and Eastern Siberia's petroleum and gas. This can stimulate trade and, more importantly, provide material foundations for reforms in North Korea and, eventually Korea's unification.⁹⁴

Some South Korean experts argue that when the TSR-TKR railway and pipelines are opened and Korean ships can go to the Arctic through the Russian Far East, this initiative will be realized.⁹⁵ Also in this context, the successful completion of a pilot project connecting Khasan in Russia and Rajin in North Korea's Special Economic Zone by rail and rebuilding the port of Rajin are significant developments.⁹⁶ Russian writers also cite other infrastructural projects with North Korea as signs of progress, including the settlement of its debts to Russia, and willingness to trade bilaterally in rubles.⁹⁷

China and South Korea have already preceded Russia here despite these aforementioned projects. By 2017, China had clearly dwarfed Russia's economic presence in areas like North Korea, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan.⁹⁸ Beijing long ago grasped the desirability of access to North Korean ports to exploit the Arctic commercially. Moscow fears that China may use the Rajin port to gain access to the Arctic and thereby minimize Russia's commercial exposure in the developing Northern Sea Route (NSR). Meanwhile, China has also gained access to another North Korean port at Chongjin on the East China Sea. While China is interested in the DPRK's ports to gain access for its northeastern provinces, the Arctic connection features prominently in Russia's mind, as Russian analysts observe.

The most significant Arctic-related shipping development in China is the leasing of North Korea's port by Hunchun Chuangli Haiyun Logistics Ltd, based in neighboring Jilin province, in northeastern China. Rajin lies on the far northeastern tip of North Korea, near its border with Russia. The company is private, but the lease was agreed on 'in cooperation with six Chinese ministries and the Jilin (sic) provincial government'. In 2008 a 10-year lease was signed for Rajin's Pier 1. This granted China access to the Sea of Japan for the first time since 1938. Although the Arctic was not mentioned in media reports about the lease, Chinese scholars presumably view Rajin as a potential Arctic hub. According to several Chinese analysts, the opening of Arctic shipping routes will be beneficial for the Tumen river area. In late 2011 the lease was extended for another 20 years. A year later, Hunchun Chuangli's parent company, Dalian Chuangli Group, was granted 50-year leases on Rajin's piers 4, 5 and 6.⁹⁹

Chinese observers feared exclusion from this Russian-DPRK project. Zhou Yongsheng urged China's inclusion in the project.¹⁰⁰ Now that the Russia-DPRK project is suspended and China's Arctic reach is growing, its economic primacy in its ties to North Korea is uncontested and a major factor of its leverage over the entire complex of North Korean issues. Meanwhile, Russia cut its 2017-2018 state spending on Arctic transport infrastructure by 90%.¹⁰¹ In other words, even before 2018, China had preempted Russia here.

Accounting for all these economic, military-strategic, and ideological-political interests, we easily see that Moscow and Beijing have compelling, and more crucially, comingled ideological-political-strategic-economic interests in common against the U.S. Accordingly, they cannot easily permit North Korea to act independently in ways that sideline them, even if they both need and desire a détente in Northeast Asia that minimizes the risks of a war in Korea. These interests correlate with their expectations regarding North Korea's role in their regional economic designs. Russia has pursued the TSR-TKR projects as an obsession since before 2000, advancing them at every opportunity as a solution to any problem in the previous six-party negotiations.¹⁰² Likewise, since 2014, if not earlier, Moscow has systematically upgraded its economic ties with North Korea, to achieve potential economic leverage and opportunities to advance its railway and energy proposals, and also to ensure that it remained a politically significant player in North Korea. When peace will have emerged, North Korea will play a significant role as an economic partner in the grand scheme of Moscow's "pivot to Asia."¹⁰³

China concurrently sought to manipulate its preeminent economic presence in North Korea to chastise North Korea for risking peace by going nuclear; yet it has stayed its hand to prevent its greater nightmare, the economically driven collapse of the regime.¹⁰⁴ While China exercised severe economic pressure on North Korea through substantial diminution of its trade with the DPRK in 2017-2018, the advent of talks with the U.S. has led to an effusion of optimism.¹⁰⁵ China is now apparently urging North Korea to join its BRI, arguing that it would prosper by doing so. This move would reduce China's economic exposure to a politically dangerous situation, yet would also subordinate North Korea's economy to China.¹⁰⁶

Factors that Impede Collaboration

While both sides see large economic opportunities beckoning, they are also competing rivals in North Korea. One might ask why, given their optimism about future economic prospects and common apprehension about too independent a North Korean policy, they have supported Pyongyang's negotiating strategy. Arguably, they have no other choice, unless they want to risk war or marginalization. And should North Korea reach an agreement with Washington that offers economic benefits, Russia and/or China could lose some, if not much, of their influence.¹⁰⁷ That possibility has become much more a real prospect, though the Hanoi summit's outcome temporarily reduces that prospect.

Japan has clearly been marginalized.¹⁰⁸ Although Kim Jong-un has held four summits with China, the conventional wisdom about China's ability to influence North Korea is arguably inadequate or incomplete. Undoubtedly, Beijing possesses considerable means of economic leverage on Pyongyang. But it remains reluctant to use its full leverage beyond registering its unhappiness with the DPRK's behavior. Furthermore, while North Korea clearly wants to retain China's good will and coordinate with it, North Korea will not subordinate its interests to those of China. Indeed, some argue that one reason for nuclearization is to evade Chinese pressure to subordinate North Korea.¹⁰⁹ Prior to 2018, Kim Jong-un showed no hesitation in brutally challenging Chinese interests and factions within North Korea by murdering his uncle and his half-brother who had been under Chinese protection to eliminate any channel of Chinese influence over his government.

Concurrently, he upgraded economic ties to Russia, thereby continuing his family legacy of endlessly manipulating Sino-Russian competition for influence over North Korea.¹¹⁰ This highly productive tactic expands North Korea's space for maneuver and reduces the Sino-Russian scope of influence over North Korea. Moreover, the DPRK has never fully trusted Beijing or Moscow and fears abandonment or efforts to suppress its independence.¹¹¹ One reason for nuclear weapons is, therefore, the desire to achieve independence from both those powers and force them to offer resources to sustain North Korea, since Pyongyang apparently still will not undertake Chinese or Vietnamese types of reforms, presumably due to fears of their political consequences.

Given the continuing Sino-Russian fears of being sidelined, Sino-Russian support for North Korea suggests that they have no choice but to let North Korea deal directly with Washington as long as their equities—which are greater in China's case as a belligerent during the Korean War—are respected.¹¹² In other words, the advent of a direct U.S.-DPRK dialogue has overridden their fears of being sidelined, brought them together, yet prevented them from blocking this dialogue. And it is now clear that the U.S. has no intention of allowing them into a multilateral negotiating format with North Korea, another sign of Russia's diminished leverage.¹¹³ The failure in Hanoi and Kim's apparent failure to obtain badly needed economic help in his summit with Putin may, therefore, lead Kim to resume playing Moscow against Beijing to garner resources and create more space should he decide to keep pursuing the U.S. option.

Russia's dilemma about marginalization goes deeper and it has fewer means to confront it. Russia's primary vital interests in Korea are peace and inclusion. Those linked interests are equally critical in importance because exclusion from a Korean peace process means

Russia cannot guarantee that its interests will be safeguarded or that it has any leverage over other actors concerning questions of war and peace. Moscow has long known this and been visibly alarmed about it.¹¹⁴ Consequently, the strategy Russia and China have chosen to follow necessarily confers the current initiative on North Korea. It is the only strategy that lets Russia entertain the idea that in the future it can greatly expand economic, and especially energy ties with North Korea.¹¹⁵

Although China has an even greater economic stake in North Korea and has visibly improved relations with North Korea, it too has reacted to Pyongyang's initiatives, and not enforced its own strategy. It may balk at supporting Washington, given the strong Sino-American economic and geopolitical rivalry, but precisely for that reason, it cannot visibly obstruct the talks with Washington or the inter-Korean negotiation process, lest its motives be exposed and either or both Koreas make a separate and new deal with Washington. So, at least until Hanoi, China could not stop North Korea from moving forward with Washington and Seoul. After the Kim-Putin summit it will be of no little interest to see how China moves on Korean issues.

China's victory to date over Russia in the competition for influence in North Korea has not stopped the rivalry between them that lets North Korea continue playing the two off against each other, even as it solicits their support for its negotiating position. But what most benefitted the DPRK before Hanoi is that it was driving the negotiation train thanks to Trump and Moon's decision to engage Kim Jong-un directly. This forced China and Russia to support Kim's position in order to realize their key strategic, political, and economic interests. That outcome represents a welcome reversal for Pyongyang of its perceived situation since the end of the Korean War. Developments after the Hanoi and Vladivostok summits will indicate to what degree this trend will continue and how it will affect the players.

Like Washington, Moscow and Beijing have had to realize the limits of their power in dealing with North Korea to achieve their overriding goals of displacing or supplanting the U.S. Asian alliance system, or even the intermediary goal of demonstrating their indispensability as great powers to any Asian strategic changes. Korean regional dynamics, along with the global dynamics of China and Russia's break with the United States' normative posture and its supposedly hegemonic designs upon them (and refusal to take them as seriously as they wish to be valued) have helped foster the alliance we see today. This also shows the ability of Asian middle powers to exert influence on the great powers.

Jumping to the conclusion that Russia's great power arrogance will not permit it to continue playing second fiddle to China seems misplaced for now even if analysts simply invoke this conclusion as a given. Indeed, Russian analysts at IMEMO (the Institute of International Relations and Global Economics) denied this already in 2017 and stated that Russia is, in fact, or has already, accommodated itself to China's primacy.¹¹⁶ Three points are crucial here. First, Russia's growing dependence on Chinese material and political support inhibits Russia's ability to assert itself as a great power, especially in Asia, without Chinese support. Even Putin seems to recognize this, as he has said that, "the main struggle, which is now underway, is that for global leadership and we are not going to contest China on this."¹¹⁷ Second, China will happily support Russian challenges to Europe and the U.S. for this fits perfectly with its traditional strategic approach of fighting with "a borrowed sword" or having barbarians fight barbarians and thus weaken or distract U.S. capacity to resist

growing Chinese power.¹¹⁸ Lastly, if we look at China's treatment of Russia when it opened a base in Tajikistan, it is clear that China moves very cautiously and solicitously regarding Russia since preserving this alliance is clearly of the utmost strategic priority to Beijing.¹¹⁹ So, despite China's imperial ambitions, this bilateral community of interests is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Indeed, given global tensions, it may actually get stronger before it weakens.

China is also steadily evicting Russia from past positions in Central Asia and will work to subordinate if not exclude it from long-term influence over North Korea despite its diplomatic caution and solicitude for Russia.¹²⁰ China's attitude toward Central Asia arguably also represents the way Beijing looks at Moscow's equities over the short and long run for Korea. Jeanne Wilson and Nadege Rolland have noted China's "scrupulous respect" that goes far to assuage Russia's permanently wounded ego.¹²¹ As Rolland writes,

Chinese strategists are clear-eyed about Russia's regional ambitions and pursuit of prestige, its concerns about China's strategic intent, and its uneasiness with the growing power imbalance. At the same time they are aware that Beijing's own regional supremacy cannot be achieved if Russia is antagonized and stands in the way. Chinese strategists thus advocate a low-friction path, prudently working on ways to assuage Moscow's fears while taking advantage of its current isolation and lack of alternative options. They hope that a concerted effort might enable the two strategic partners to avoid the rise of bilateral tensions and discord, while helping both achieve their regional objectives. As one top Chinese diplomat put it, Eurasia is the main region where China must work hand in hand with Russia to seek 'convergence and a balance of interests' and align both countries' Eurasian grand strategies. Visible between the lines of Chinese assessments, however, is the expectation that the accommodation of Russia's needs and fears will only be a transitional phase during which China needs to bide its time; in the long run Russia will have become a toothless former superpower, surrendering the stage for Beijing to fully assert its influence over Eurasia.¹²²

It appears that this or similar procedures are being used in defense consultations on the Arctic and Northeast Asia (possibly Southeast too) to solidify the alliance until China, as it expects, will, by a natural process of growth combined with Russian decline, fully reveal its hegemony over Eurasia. For now, that process has succeeded brilliantly, and there is little reason to see it failing in the immediate or short-term future, especially as Russian isolation continues due to its war on the West and domestic stagnation, policies that leave no option but dependence on China and alliance against the West.

Conclusion

Paradoxically, the relationships outlined here offer Washington an opportunity to negotiate with Pyongyang despite the abortive Hanoi summit, if it reckons with regional security dynamics and accords them their rightful priority. Fostering North Korean independence to the greatest possible degree by recognizing North Korea's need for security as it denuclearizes, offers the U.S. the tangible possibility of reshaping regional dynamics to its advantage, because North Korea has shown that it too can move the regional equation and

shape Sino-Russian alliance dynamics. Doing so requires a much more coherent American negotiation process. However, failure to grasp the existing possibility for negotiating inter-Korean peace and denuclearization through the inter-Korean negotiations on the one hand, and Washington and Pyongyang on the other, could cause a reversion towards the bipolarity that is always lurking in the wings.

Moscow and Beijing are driven very much by anti-Americanism and their aspirations for influence over both Koreas, and would, if they could, thwart any serious denuclearization or progress towards peace while trying to prevent the outbreak of a hot war. But thwarting the current negotiations by freezing the status quo only reproduces repeated and dangerous crises, if not a new war. For now, Moscow and Beijing have no choice but to support the current negotiations to retain their influence over Pyongyang. This gives Washington the golden opportunity to reduce that influence and craft a mutually beneficial solution in Korea. Paradoxically, the dynamics of the Russo-Chinese alliance, much to the likely chagrin of those governments, has created the conditions allowing for this reshaping to occur. Such solutions are on the table, so to speak, for inspection.¹²³ Hopefully, the U.S. will seize the opportunity standing before it and lead Northeast Asia out of its dead end. Otherwise, a return to the status quo ante is all but ensured. And who benefits from that?

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