

Sino-Russian Relations and Security Ties to North Korea

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During the period leading up to the turn toward diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula that began in 2018, China and Russia achieved close cooperation in addressing the North Korean nuclear crisis. This cooperation was one of the most striking examples of the increasingly close relationship that China and Russia have forged in recent years amid a downturn in both countries' relations with the United States.¹ It also reflected the close similarity in the two countries' understandings of their respective security interests on the Korean Peninsula.

As the crisis on the peninsula intensified, China and Russia expressed similar views regarding the underlying reasons for the conflict and diplomatic paths for resolving it. They professed their opposition to the presence of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula and supported increasingly tough sanctions against North Korea following its repeated nuclear and missile tests. However, they remained united in their efforts to limit pressure on the North Korean regime, aiming to prevent its collapse. Above all, China and Russia were determined to limit and ultimately reduce the U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia, including the deployment of U.S. missile defense systems.

China and Russia welcomed the turn toward diplomacy that began in 2018, which essentially followed their preferred course of a moratorium on North Korean nuclear and missile tests and a corresponding pause in the conduct of large-scale U.S.-South Korean joint military exercises. The two countries nevertheless remained skeptical about the prospects for resolving the crisis, given the large gap between the positions of North Korea and the United States. They sought to coordinate their diplomatic efforts closely with those of the North Korean leadership, though China proved more successful in this respect than Russia because of the much greater influence that it now wields on the Korean Peninsula. China and Russia may also have intensified their discussions of security coordination. Russia's large-scale Vostok-2018 military exercises, in which Chinese forces participated for the first time in this quadrennial series, may have served as a demonstration of Russian and Chinese military power in Northeast Asia in advance of the possible outbreak of armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula. The security interests of China and Russia on the peninsula are not identical, especially regarding the long-term prospects for reunification, but their interests are likely to remain largely aligned for the foreseeable future. Close cooperation between China and Russia on the Korean Peninsula's security issues is, therefore, likely to continue.

China's Security Ties to North Korea

The Korean Peninsula plays a crucial role in China's security considerations. Relations between China and North Korea, including bilateral security ties, continue to be based officially on the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, which the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) signed in 1961. The treaty includes a mutual defense clause, making provisions for the two countries to provide each other with military assistance in the event that either faces external aggression. This document, therefore, affords China the legal right to intervene militarily on the Korean Peninsula in the event of war. Nevertheless, China insists that it has a normal state-to-state relationship with North Korea, not a formal alliance, and that it is under no obligation to defend North Korea in any conflict that the regime in Pyongyang initiates. In practice, China would be widely expected to intervene in any war on the Korean Peninsula, as it did in 1950.²

China seeks to avoid such an outcome. The outbreak of a war on the peninsula would create a grave security threat close to its own borders and would stimulate a large, potentially destabilizing flow of refugees into its own territory. China, therefore, voices its support for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. It also officially supports the elimination of all nuclear weapons from the peninsula. Together, these preferences find expression in China's policy of "Three Nos": 不战, 不乱, 无核 (no war, no chaos, and no nuclear weapons.).³ China also professes support for the eventual peaceful reunification of Korea.

China's paramount goal, however, is to dramatically reduce and ultimately eliminate the U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia, as in the wider Asia-Pacific region, allowing China to establish itself as the dominant regional power. Toward this end, China seeks to prevent the reunification of the Korean Peninsula under circumstances in which the newly unified Korea would be a U.S. ally. Such an outcome potentially would allow the United States to station military forces north of the 38th parallel and close to China's borders. China, therefore, perceives an interest in maintaining the existence of North Korea as a buffer state. Despite its official support for the denuclearization of the peninsula, China prefers the existence of a nuclear-armed North Korea to the collapse of the regime in Pyongyang if such a collapse were to occur in a way that the Chinese government viewed as detrimental to its own security interests.⁴ China supports the eventual reunification of the peninsula, but only as a country that is, at minimum, neutral. With no prospect of such an outcome currently in sight, China is likely to persist in its belief that the status quo is preferable to any unification process for the foreseeable future.⁵

The North Korean nuclear weapons program, nevertheless, poses a series of challenges for China's security policies. North Korea's nuclear tests and missile launches ratchet up tensions in the region, heightening the risk of major war, and possibly nuclear war, as events in 2017 starkly demonstrated. Such actions also increase the likelihood that U.S. allies in Asia such as Japan and South Korea eventually could build nuclear weapons of their own. In the view of Chinese strategists, North Korea's belligerent posture, including its nuclear weapons program, serves as the pretext for a U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia that ultimately contains China as well as North Korea. The U.S. deployment of the Thermal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile defense system in South Korea underscored these concerns. China strongly opposed the THAAD deployment, arguing that this system posed a direct threat to its nuclear deterrent.⁶ Chinese officials argued that the monitoring range of the system's X-band radar reached far beyond the Korean Peninsula and deep into Chinese territory.⁷ For all of these reasons, Chinese leaders have become progressively more irritated with North Korea's behavior in recent years and increasingly supportive of international sanctions against the regime in Pyongyang.

At the same time, China recognizes that North Korea's nuclear weapons program serves as the only reliable deterrent against a potential U.S. attack on the regime in Pyongyang. It thereby serves China's interests by ensuring the continued survival of North Korea as a buffer state for China. North Korea's provocations create demands on U.S. military resources and attention, potentially reducing pressure on China.⁸ Chinese leaders also recognize that progress in the construction of North Korean nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles has the potential to weaken U.S. alliances in Asia.⁹ These advances could increasingly call into question the willingness of U.S. citizens to put their own cities at risk

on behalf of their Asian allies' security.¹⁰ Although China has voted for increasingly tough sanctions in the UN Security Council, it has successfully worked with Russia to weaken the versions proposed by the United States, aiming to prevent the destabilization of the regime in Pyongyang. Along with Russia, China has sought to ensure that a reduction of the U.S. security footprint in Northeast Asia accompanies steps toward denuclearization by North Korea. As with reunification of the peninsula, China supports the goal of denuclearization only if it occurs in a way that preserves China's perceived security interests in the region.

Russia's Security Ties to North Korea

Like the PRC, the Soviet Union signed a treaty with North Korea in 1961 that included a mutual defense clause. Relations between Moscow and Pyongyang took a downturn during Mikhail Gorbachev's tenure, then reached a low point during the early post-Soviet years, when President Boris Yeltsin focused on relations with South Korea while largely neglecting North Korea. Yeltsin annulled the Soviet-North Korean treaty in 1994 but soon expressed a desire to rebuild relations with the regime in Pyongyang.¹¹ In 2000, Russia and North Korea signed the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Good-Neighborly Relations, which continues to provide the official basis for bilateral relations. Because this treaty contains no mutual defense clause, it signaled the formal end of the alliance.¹²

Russia, therefore, bears no obligation to defend North Korea, in contrast to China's relations with North Korea, which arguably constitute an alliance. Russia's diplomatic and security influence on the Korean Peninsula also pales in comparison to that of China, given Russia's minimal economic ties with North Korea, the underdeveloped state of its eastern regions, and its generally weak position in the Asia-Pacific region. Russia also perceives a greater interest in the eventual reunification of the peninsula than does China, for reasons discussed below. In other respects, however, the pattern of security ties between Russia and North Korea bears many similarities to those of the China-North Korea relationship.

Russia shares a border with North Korea, albeit a short one of only about 11 miles. Like China, Russia seeks to avoid the outbreak of war on the peninsula, which would pose a dangerous security threat to the Russian Far East.¹³ Russia also aims to prevent the collapse of the regime in Pyongyang, fearing that such an outcome would destabilize the surrounding region and cause a flow of refugees toward Russian territory.¹⁴ Russia officially opposes the presence of nuclear weapons on the peninsula. The most recent "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," published in late 2016, states that Russia views the resumption of the Six-Party Talks as the most effective means to achieve the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.¹⁵ Russia, therefore, shares the objectives of China's "Three No's."

Russia's official support for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is based on a variety of considerations. Russia continues to possess a large nuclear arsenal, which is one of its few remaining attributes of superpower status. As such, Russia has a strong interest in the defense of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the prevention of the acquisition of nuclear weapons by states that lack nuclear status under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Russia views North Korea's nuclear tests and missile launches as potentially destabilizing for regional security. It considers North Korea's nuclear weapons program and provocative behavior to be a pretext for U.S. regional military buildups that are at least partly directed at the containment of Russia as well as China.

From the beginning of his tenure, Russian President Vladimir Putin perceived this problem. In July 2000, during his first year as president, Putin visited North Korea with the goal of persuading North Korea to cease its plans to build nuclear-capable missiles. In this way, he hoped to remove a reason for the United States to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which ultimately occurred in 2002.¹⁶ Russia joined China in opposing THAAD following the 2016 announcement that the system would be deployed. Although Russia's nuclear arsenal remains large enough to overwhelm any prospective U.S. theater or national missile defense system, Russia professes concern that the United States is establishing a global missile defense system that could eventually threaten Russia's nuclear deterrent. Russia is, therefore, taking steps to enhance its capabilities for nuclear deterrence, both through upgrades to its stock of nuclear-capable missiles and through the deployment of means of non-nuclear deterrence. Such concerns underscore the ways in which Russia, like China, views the problems of the Korean Peninsula in the context of global politics and rivalry with the United States.¹⁷

Despite its official opposition to North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons, Russia professes understanding for the motives behind Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. Russian leaders and experts assign a significant amount of blame for the crisis to the United States, arguing that if not for U.S. threats to use military force against the regime in Pyongyang and to topple it, North Korea would have no reason to build nuclear weapons. Their claim is that, in the face of a security threat from the United States, nuclear weapons offer North Korea the only reliable deterrent.¹⁸

In the long term, Russia's position on unification of the Korean Peninsula differs somewhat from China's. Russia has a stronger interest than China in reunification or at least a much closer relationship between the two Koreas. Unification or integration would allow Russia to pursue economic projects that could stimulate the development of the Russian Far East, expand Russia's influence on the peninsula, and enhance Russia's profile in the Asia-Pacific region. These projects could include the linkage of the Trans-Siberian Railway with a railroad traversing the Korean Peninsula, the construction of oil and gas pipelines from Russian territory onto the peninsula, and the integration of regional electric grids.¹⁹ The potential for such projects is one of the few levers of influence that Russia wields on the peninsula. Their successful conclusion could allow North Korea to reduce its economic dependence on China.²⁰ This, in turn, could allow Russia to strengthen its relations with the Korean Peninsula and other regional actors, especially Japan, thereby reducing its own dependence on China.

The difference in Russian and Chinese interests regarding the potential unification of the Korean Peninsula should not be exaggerated, however, especially in the near term. First of all, unification is still a remote prospect. For the foreseeable future, Russia and China are focused on addressing the immediate crisis, in which their interests are largely aligned. Moreover, although Russia's interest in unification is stronger than China's, Russia is also concerned about the manner in which unification would occur. Like China, Russia seeks to avoid an outcome in which the government of a newly unified Korea would form a tight political-military alliance with the United States.²¹ From Russia's perspective, as from China's, the maintenance of North Korea as a buffer state would be preferable to such an outcome.²² Just as Russia is concerned about the deployment of NATO forces along its

western borders, it also seeks to avoid the potential deployment of U.S. forces close to its eastern border, as would be possible if the United States were to gain an opportunity to station forces on the Korean Peninsula north of the 38th parallel.²³

China-Russia Relations and Security Ties to North Korea

As the above analysis suggests, China and Russia hold positions on the security issues of the Korean Peninsula that are similar, or in some cases, nearly identical. As the China-Russia relationship has grown closer in recent years, the two countries' cooperation on the North Korean nuclear crisis has increased significantly. As Gilbert Rozman has argued, the increasingly tense North Korean nuclear crisis of recent years has been a test of relations within the U.S.-China-Russia triangle, and Russia has sided with China in this important case.²⁴ Both China and Russia view the issues of the Korean Peninsula through the prism of global security and their competition with the United States. They seek to reduce the U.S. security presence in Northeast Asia, and they accuse the United States of using North Korea's nuclear weapons program and provocative behavior as a pretext for strengthening this presence. They are particularly concerned about U.S. deployment of THAAD in South Korea, viewing it as a potential threat to their own nuclear deterrents.²⁵

China and Russia officially oppose the presence of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. They express irritation at North Korea's provocative behavior and unwillingness to follow their lead. As an expression of their irritation, they have supported increasingly tight sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council, though they have also succeeded in weakening U.S.-proposed sanctions and in helping North Korea to evade the sanctions that have been imposed, all in an effort to limit international pressure on the North Korean regime and to prevent its collapse. As much as North Korea's construction of nuclear weapons and belligerent behavior may irritate them, their goal of limiting the U.S. military presence in the region overrides these concerns. Unless the United States agrees to limit its regional military presence, China and Russia will continue to support the North Korean regime and attempt to ensure its survival.²⁶

In recent years, these shared interests have stimulated heightened cooperation between China and Russia on issues related to the security of the peninsula. This cooperation has taken concrete form on several issues, including opposition to THAAD deployment, coordination during debates in the UN Security Council on proposed sanctions, and diplomatic proposals for resolving the crisis. This cooperation is likely to continue during the uncertain period of diplomacy that lies ahead.

Crisis management: 2016-2017

In early 2016, the United States and South Korea announced plans to deploy THAAD on South Korean territory as a means of defense against potential North Korean missile strikes targeting that country or U.S. military bases in Asia. Since then, China and Russia have maintained solidarity in opposition to this deployment. Their concerns differed slightly but led them to the same conclusion. China argued that the system could pose a direct threat to its own nuclear deterrent. Russian leaders knew that THAAD posed no immediate threat to their own deterrent, but they sought to halt the spread of U.S. missile defense systems

worldwide.²⁷ Russia and China agreed that THAAD was, in reality, one component of what could eventually become a global missile defense system that aims to maintain the U.S. military advantage in the Asia-Pacific region, as in Europe and elsewhere, and to contain China and Russia.²⁸ Opposition to THAAD represented the continuation of sustained efforts by China and Russia to resist the expansion of U.S. missile defense systems dating back to the 1990s, when the United States began to contemplate such plans.

During Putin's visit to China in June 2016, China and Russia issued a joint declaration on global strategic stability in which they expressed their shared opposition to THAAD deployment.²⁹ The two countries also increased their own cooperation in the area of missile defense, holding joint computer-simulated exercises in May 2016 and December 2017 in which they practiced joint actions to respond to strikes by ballistic missiles or cruise missiles.³⁰ Efforts by China and Russia to prevent the deployment of THAAD were unsuccessful, however, as the United States began to install the system in South Korea during the spring of 2017. China and Russia continue to express their opposition to U.S. missile defense systems, most recently in a joint statement issued in June 2018.³¹

As the North Korean nuclear crisis intensified in 2017, China and Russia closely coordinated their responses to events. They expressed their shared position most clearly in a July 4, 2017 joint declaration on the issues of the peninsula. In this declaration, the two countries proposed a three-stage process for resolving the crisis. The first stage would consist of a "dual freeze" in which North Korea would impose a moratorium on nuclear and ballistic missile tests, and in return the United States and South Korea would refrain from large-scale joint military exercises.³² The United States initially rejected this proposal, viewing it as merely a ploy to undermine the U.S.-South Korean alliance and other U.S. alliances in Asia. However, as the turn toward diplomacy unfolded during 2018, events essentially followed this script, allowing China and Russia to claim some credit.³³ The second stage would involve the establishment of U.S.-North Korea and inter-Korean direct dialogue to discuss principles of peaceful coexistence. The third stage would feature the establishment of multilateral negotiations on Northeast Asian security, including discussions regarding the denuclearization of the peninsula.³⁴ This proposal combined the Chinese proposals for a "dual freeze" and "parallel advancement," involving simultaneous discussions of denuclearization and a peace mechanism for the peninsula, with the Russian idea of a "roadmap" for settlement of the Korean dispute in stages.³⁵

China and Russia also coordinated their positions during discussions at the UN Security Council about the imposition of sanctions against North Korea. The two countries had traditionally opposed harsh sanctions against the regime in Pyongyang. In 2016 and 2017, however, as U.S. pressure to impose sanctions grew following a series of North Korean nuclear and missile tests, China and Russia agreed to support increasingly tough sanctions. The Security Council passed three resolutions imposing sanctions during 2016 and four more during 2017.³⁶

The approaches that China and Russia took during this period differed slightly, however. In the words of one Russian analyst, China and Russia took a "good cop/bad cop" approach.³⁷ China's relations with North Korea had deteriorated since Kim Jong-un's accession to power in 2011. Moreover, China was experiencing a relatively warm period in relations with the United States following Xi Jinping's meeting with Donald Trump at Mar-a-Lago, Florida, in March 2017. China was therefore willing to support tougher sanctions than it had

previously. Russia was more reluctant, viewing sanctions as an ineffective means to induce changes in North Korean behavior, but it ultimately agreed to follow China's lead. China and Russia nevertheless succeeded in weakening U.S. sanctions proposals. Most notably, they rejected the U.S. proposal for a total crude oil embargo, agreeing instead to restrict crude oil supplies to existing levels. Moreover, both China and Russia have helped North Korea to evade the sanctions in various ways.³⁸

The turn toward diplomacy: 2018-2019

China and Russia welcomed the turn toward diplomacy that began in 2018, including both the inter-Korean and the U.S.-North Korea dialogues. After a period of heightened tension and threats, both countries were relieved to see the issues of the Korean Peninsula return to a diplomatic track, though they recognized the fragility of this process. Officially, they professed their desire for the negotiating process to return to the Six-Party Talks, a forum including North Korea, South Korea, the United States, China, Russia, and Japan that operated between 2003 and 2009.³⁹ In practice, the diplomacy that emerged in 2018 returned to a Four-Party format featuring the United States, China, and the two Koreas, with Russia, like Japan, largely relegated to the margins.⁴⁰

Following a flurry of inter-Korean diplomacy that coincided with the February 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, South Korea, Trump accepted Kim Jong-un's offer to meet. This signaled the emergence of new diplomatic possibilities following the sharp rhetoric and escalating tensions of the previous year. The first Trump-Kim summit, which the two leaders held on June 12 in Singapore, produced a joint declaration expressing agreement in general terms on four points, namely the commitment to establish a new relationship between the United States and North Korea, joint efforts to build a regime of peace and stability on the peninsula, North Korea's commitment to denuclearization of the peninsula, and the return of the remains of American POWs/MIAs.⁴¹ Following the summit, Trump announced the cancellation of planned joint military exercises with South Korea. Together with North Korea's previously announced moratorium on nuclear and missile tests, this essentially fulfilled the call by China and Russia one year earlier for a "dual freeze."

In preparation for his meeting with Trump, Kim Jong-un turned primarily to China for support. During 2018, Kim visited China three times, twice in advance of his summit with Trump in Singapore, and again just one week after the summit. Kim's visit to China in March 2018 was his first official trip outside of North Korea and his first meeting with Xi. During this meeting, Kim and Xi reaffirmed the close bond between their two countries. Since Kim's accession to power in 2011, China and North Korea had experienced considerable tension in their relationship, as China became increasingly exasperated by North Korea's provocative behavior, both domestic and international. During this visit, the two countries endeavored to return their relationship to a solid footing. China sought to maintain its influence over North Korea, while Kim's visit demonstrated his need for Chinese support in order to increase his bargaining leverage in negotiations with the United States.⁴²

The turn toward diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula during 2018 changed some of China's calculations. As the crisis intensified during 2017, China sought to use its influence over North Korea as leverage in relations with the United States. China hoped that its willingness to apply diplomatic and economic pressure on North Korea would help to achieve more favorable U.S. policies regarding such issues as Taiwan, the South China Sea, and trade.

Now, with the turn toward diplomacy, China had to be alert to the possibility that North Korea would return to its time-worn tactic of using great-power rivalry to its advantage.⁴³ In an extreme scenario, albeit one that seemed unlikely, North Korea might achieve sufficient improvement in its relations with the United States and South Korea to dramatically reduce its reliance on China.⁴⁴ By the time Kim visited Beijing in June, one week after his summit with Trump, a burgeoning trade war was creating tension in U.S.-China relations. This situation offered an opening for Kim to disrupt the cooperation on Korean issues that the United States and China had recently achieved, which had increased pressure on his own country, and use a strengthened relationship with China as leverage in his ongoing negotiations with the United States.⁴⁵

Russia also sought to engage actively in the diplomatic process, but its consultations with North Korea were less extensive than those of China. The Russian and North Korean foreign ministers exchanged official visits in April and May, but no meeting took place between Putin and Kim in 2018. Following North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho's visit to Russia in April, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited North Korea in late May, less than two weeks before the Singapore summit. Lavrov delivered a letter from Putin inviting the North Korean leader to visit Russia, and in particular, if Kim so desired, to attend the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in September 2018.⁴⁶ South Korean President Moon Jae-in reportedly indicated that he would also attend the forum if his North Korean counterpoint did so. Xi and Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo had already agreed to attend. If the two Korean leaders had attended the forum, then Russia would have succeeded in hosting the first meeting of all of Northeast Asia's heads of state.⁴⁷ This would have been a major diplomatic coup for Russia, signaling its re-emergence as a major actor in Korean issues and possibly presaging a revival of the Six-Party Talks. Ultimately, however, neither Kim nor Moon attended the summit.

Despite its continued marginalization on the issues of the Korean Peninsula, Russia sought to exert influence by working closely with China. During the fall, China and Russia continued to coordinate their diplomacy in addressing North Korea. In September, discussions at the UN Security Council showcased the gap between the United States and its allies, on one side, and China, Russia, and North Korea, on the other, regarding the appropriate path to denuclearization. The United States insisted that the sanctions should remain in place until North Korea had fully abandoned its nuclear weapons program. China and Russia, meanwhile, supported North Korea in demanding that the process of denuclearization proceed in stages. In their view, the United States should first ease sanctions as a reward for North Korea's willingness to enter negotiations, then engage in a step-by-step process in which the two sides would trade reciprocal concessions.⁴⁸

Although North Korea turned primarily to China for support in its diplomacy with the United States, it also sought to use the solidarity between China and Russia on Korean issues to gain a bit of added leverage. In October 2018, Choe Son-hui, North Korea's vice foreign minister responsible for negotiations on nuclear issues with the United States, visited Beijing and Moscow.⁴⁹ Following her meeting with Russian officials, deputy foreign ministers from all three countries held a conference in Moscow, the first trilateral consultation of its kind.⁵⁰ They reiterated their support for a phased process, rejecting U.S. insistence that North Korea fully denuclearize before the United States would support the removal of sanctions and agree to a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War. In a joint declaration, they called

for the UN Security Council, in light of “important steps in the direction of denuclearization” by North Korea, to review existing sanctions. The process for resolving the crisis, they asserted, should be “step-by-step and synchronized,” with the parties involved making progress through reciprocal concessions.⁵¹ Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov, the Russian representative in this meeting, said that unilateral demands for North Korea to denuclearize were unlikely to succeed.⁵²

Such disagreements over the proper sequence of actions continued to confound U.S.-North Korean diplomacy. The February summit in Hanoi between Trump and Kim, which Kim preceded with yet another visit to China in January, broke down amid disagreement over the steps that North Korea would have to take in order to obtain relief from sanctions. Kim reportedly offered to dismantle the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, including those used for plutonium and uranium enrichment, in return for wide-ranging relief from sanctions imposed since 2016. Trump rejected this offer, insisting that North Korea would have to take further steps toward denuclearization in order to obtain the sanctions relief that Kim sought.⁵³ Experts believe that North Korea operates at least one uranium-enrichment facility besides Yongbyon, as well as other nuclear facilities throughout the country. Less than one month after the summit, North Korea threatened to abandon talks with the United States and resume nuclear and missile tests.⁵⁴ Kim later announced that he was willing to meet Trump again, but only if the United States offered what he considered to be an acceptable proposal by the end of 2019.⁵⁵

The failure of the Hanoi summit had the potential to reset the diplomatic chessboard, at least somewhat. In the weeks that followed, Kim shifted diplomatic attention toward Russia, offering an opportunity for Moscow to increase its influence on Korean issues. Following the Singapore summit in 2018, Kim visited China almost immediately while declining to take up Putin’s invitation to visit Russia. After the Hanoi summit, by contrast, Kim held no immediate follow-up visit with Xi, despite traveling through Chinese territory on his long train journey home. In late April, following an announcement during the previous month that Kim would soon visit Russia, the North Korean leader traveled to Vladivostok for a summit meeting with Putin, who was on his way to Beijing for China’s second Belt and Road Forum. The meeting produced no breakthroughs, but it offered the Russian and North Korean leaders an opportunity to express their shared opposition to the U.S. negotiating position and their shared support for a gradual process of conflict resolution featuring the easing of sanctions in return for steps toward denuclearization by North Korea.⁵⁶

Kim’s visit to Russia may have signaled not only his frustration with the United States following the collapse of negotiations in Hanoi, but also his continued suspicion of China. The meeting with Putin allowed Kim to demonstrate that North Korea had other diplomatic options.⁵⁷ Kim’s visit, which Russia had long sought, also offered Russia an opportunity to reinsert itself into Korean diplomacy. Following a period in which Kim focused his diplomatic efforts on China, the United States, and South Korea, the Putin-Kim summit offered an opening for Russia to broaden this Four-Party format and reassert its own influence. Ideally, from Russia’s standpoint, this would eventually lead to the revival of the Six-Party Talks. Such an outcome was far from certain, however, as both the United States and China might prefer the current approach of direct diplomacy with North Korea in bilateral formats.⁵⁸

If the recent past is an accurate guide, then Russia is unlikely to assert its influence at China's expense. Between 2012 and 2018, when China-North Korea relations were tense, Russia sought to increase its influence with North Korea, but without challenging China overtly. Indeed, some Russian analysts speculated that Russia was now stepping forward to offer support for North Korea on China's behalf at a time when China was focused on ending the U.S.-China trade war.⁵⁹ China, for its part, called for patience following the breakdown of the Hanoi summit, with a Foreign Ministry spokesman stating that the issues were unlikely to be resolved overnight. In some ways, the stalemate following Hanoi was a favorable outcome for China. The U.S.-North Korea diplomacy had dramatically reduced the potential for war on the Korean Peninsula, but it had also failed to produce an agreement that the Chinese leadership might view as adverse to its own interests.⁶⁰

China and Russia continued to support the U.S.-North Korea diplomatic process while recognizing the difficulty of achieving a breakthrough. As one Russian expert argued, the goal of an agreement in which North Korea would exchange its nuclear weapons for security was extremely difficult to achieve. The regime in Pyongyang would be exceedingly unlikely to relinquish its only trump card in return for a mere promise of security, and yet it was difficult to see how the United States could offer an irreversible security guarantee.⁶¹ In advance of his first summit with Trump, Kim agreed to drop North Korea's demand that the United States withdraw its 28,000 troops stationed in South Korea as a condition for denuclearization.⁶² Ultimately, however, North Korea might insist on retaining at least a minimal nuclear deterrent, a possibility that some U.S. experts recognized "through clenched teeth." In any case, U.S.-North Korea diplomacy was likely to feature repeated breakdowns as both sides periodically expressed their dissatisfaction with the other.⁶³

China-Russia military cooperation in the event of armed conflict

The negotiating process between the United States and North Korea remains fragile. The talks could once again break down, reviving a familiar pattern from the past three decades in which tensions escalate, diplomacy begins, an agreement is announced, and then the talks deteriorate and tension builds once again. The ultimate test of the China-Russia relationship, as it relates to the two countries' security ties to North Korea, would arise in the worst-case scenario, namely the outbreak of armed conflict on the peninsula.

One factor that has held China and Russia back from establishing a formal political-military alliance is the unwillingness of both countries to be dragged into the other's regional conflicts. China offered Russia only limited diplomatic support during its wars in Georgia and Ukraine, pointedly declining to endorse either Russia's recognition of the sovereignty of two breakaway regions in Georgia or its annexation of Crimea. Russia, in turn, maintains official neutrality on China's maritime disputes in the South and East China seas. Russia's main strategic interests lie in Europe and the Middle East, while China's are in the Asia-Pacific region. The Korean Peninsula, however, is one region in which both countries perceive that they have vital interests at stake. This raises the question of how much they might cooperate militarily in a war on the peninsula.

The Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation, signed by China and Russia in 2001, contains no mutual security clause. Neither country is obligated to provide military assistance to the other if it faces armed aggression. Nor do any treaty obligations

bind them to provide joint military assistance in the event of armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula. No publicly available evidence suggests that the Russian and Chinese militaries have developed joint operational plans, but some analysts suggest that Central Asia and the Korean Peninsula are the two regions most likely to be included in any such plans.⁶⁴

Russia's Vostok-2018 military exercises, held in September 2018, may have reflected discussions between Russian and Chinese leaders about possible security coordination in the event of an outbreak of armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula.⁶⁵ For the first time in the history of this quadrennial exercise in the Russian Far East, Russia invited Chinese forces to participate. In previous versions of this exercise, the Russian armed forces had simulated the defense of Russian territory against a possible Chinese invasion. Most notably, the 2010 exercise ended with a simulated tactical nuclear strike against an invading army. This time, despite being staged in the Russian Far East, the scenario clearly simulated conflict between Russia and NATO. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) sent a relatively small contingent of 3,200 military personnel, 30 aircraft, and 900 tanks and armored vehicles to join massive Russian forces in joint firing operations and tests of interoperability in the Tsugol combined arms training area, located near the border with Mongolia. China's participation in this exercise illustrated the increasingly close China-Russia relationship, including the two countries' growing bilateral defense cooperation.

China and Russia may have intended to use the Vostok-2018 exercises to influence the course of events on the Korean Peninsula. Although the turn toward diplomacy began several months before Vostok-2018 was held, planning for the exercises began even earlier, during a period of heightened tension and threats between the United States and North Korea. The two countries may have intended the exercises to serve, at least partially, as a display of Russian and Chinese military power in Northeast Asia in anticipation of the possible outbreak of armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula.⁶⁶ The exercises were also a means to improve interoperability between the two countries' military forces, which could be valuable in the event of a Korean crisis.⁶⁷ In the event of armed conflict on the peninsula, China might wish to secure Russia's military support. Russia's recent combat experience and especially its nuclear arsenal could prove valuable in such a conflict, increasing the likelihood that China could achieve a favorable outcome.⁶⁸

Conclusion

The brinkmanship and risk of major war that were pervasive throughout 2017 have faded, but prospects for diplomacy to address the problems of the Korean Peninsula remain uncertain. China and Russia welcome the diplomatic process, but they recognize the difficulty of resolving the crisis and even remain somewhat wary of a U.S.-North Korea agreement that might be detrimental to their own interests. As this process unfolds, China and Russia are likely to continue their close coordination, with China taking the lead and Russia largely playing a supportive role. Russia's willingness to accept its secondary status on this issue is consistent with a recent pattern in which Russia has frequently deferred to China's wishes for the sake of strengthening this relationship. Russia also recognizes China's higher stakes on the Korean Peninsula and anticipates that China will return the favor by supporting Russia's positions on issues such as Ukraine and the Middle East.⁶⁹ The convergence of Chinese and Russian views on international issues, especially their shared opposition to a U.S.-dominated international system and to claims of the universal

applicability of liberal values, suggests that their close partnership is likely to be durable for the foreseeable future.⁷⁰ Similarity in the two countries' perceptions of their security interests on the Korean Peninsula indicates that their close cooperation on this issue is likely to endure as well.

In the long run, Chinese and Russian interests on the peninsula could diverge. China seeks to establish itself as the dominant power in Northeast Asia, whereas Russia hopes to form a regional concert of great powers that would enhance its own role in the region.⁷¹ Russia would not look favorably on Chinese domination of the Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, if reunification eventually becomes a serious possibility, then Russia's eagerness to increase its regional influence through joint economic projects with the peninsula could create tension with China, which would be concerned about the impact of such developments on its own relative power in the region.⁷² Such an outcome remains a distant prospect, however. In the near term, Chinese and Russian security interests remain closely aligned. Barring a surprising diplomatic breakthrough in the affairs of the Korean Peninsula, this situation is unlikely to change soon.

Endnotes

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