

Why Did the Hanoi Summit
Fail and What Comes Next?
The View from Russia

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This chapter provides an overview of Russian expert commentary found in Russia's media during the run-up to the Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi and in its aftermath, covering the period of January to April 2019. The chapter also covers Kim's first meeting with Vladimir Putin that took place in Vladivostok in late April. With regard to the Korean Peninsula's nuclear problem, Russia's commentariat traditionally splits into three groups. The first includes specialists who are more or less neutral toward North Korea. The second one is formed by experts who sympathize more with Pyongyang and tend to blame Washington and American allies for anything that goes wrong on the Korean Peninsula. The third group, now almost extinct in Russia, represents liberal and pro-Western pundits who loath the North Korean regime and view it as a major threat to international, and Russia's, security.

Similar to Western media, the Russian press has extensively covered the preparations for the Hanoi summit, the event itself, and its outcomes. The tone of the Russian reporting did not differ much from that of the world's media. Most of the Russian commentators sounded moderately optimistic prior to the two-day summit, expecting that at least something would come out of it. That the second Kim-Trump rendezvous failed to produce any deliverables came as a somewhat disappointing surprise to most Russian observers. Still, the general mood remained cautiously optimistic even after Hanoi's apparent failure, with the prevailing majority of Russia's Korea watchers believing diplomacy between Pyongyang and Washington would continue and might eventually succeed.

The Russian commentary on the Vladivostok summit was generally positive, hailing the symbolism of Moscow's return to the major leagues of Korean Peninsula geopolitics. At the same time, many experts pointed out that, beyond displaying the decorum of the traditional Russia-DPRK friendship, the Kim-Putin summit produced modest outcomes.

Neutral Commentary

Georgy Toloraya, former diplomat posted to Pyongyang and Seoul and now an academic, is probably Russia's most prolific commentator with respect to Korean affairs. According to Toloraya, Kim Jong-un miscalculated by pinning too much hope on his ability to secure major unilateral concessions from Donald Trump during face-to-face talks and by having neglected the lower-level negotiations. In much the same vein, despite the lack of preparations at the working level, the U.S. side hoped to achieve a breakthrough at the summit talks. This should serve as a good lesson for the future.¹

Toloraya argues that the Hanoi summit was not a failure, but, rather, a temporary setback. He points out that, importantly, Kim and Trump remain committed to further dialogue. Toloraya believes that the sides have already managed to make some progress in negotiations, somewhat narrowing the gap that existed in their positions. Toloraya sees the current situation as rather unpredictable and precarious, with the potential of reversing to a crisis mode at any moment. However, he is cautiously optimistic, seeing hope for positive dynamics and even a breakthrough. Until recently Washington had no intention to earnestly negotiate with the North and only waited for the Pyongyang regime to collapse, but, also, according to Toloraya, the U.S. stance may be now changing. The Trump administration may be harboring the desire to turn the DPRK from foe into partner, chiefly on an anti-Chinese basis. If Pyongyang becomes instrumental to the U.S. strategy of balancing China in the

Asia-Pacific, Washington could turn a blind eye to North Korean nuclear weapons. Toloraya sees the idea of using North Korea to help counterweigh China as not only belonging to Trump but also being embraced by the American establishment. That said, the Russian analyst is skeptical that Kim Jong-un would buy into this anti-China plan, at least for now.²

Parsing Kim's keynote speech to the Supreme People's Assembly, the DPRK rubberstamp parliament, Toloraya notes as an encouraging sign that the North Korean supreme leader refrained from making any overt threats to the U.S., such as resuming nuclear or intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests that many observers feared would have been Pyongyang's response to the American inflexibility at the Hanoi summit. Toloraya interprets the economic part of Kim's address, in which he emphasized the need for even more self-reliance, as an indication that the DPRK leadership has realized that the sanctions are unlikely to be lifted any time soon. Toloraya points out Kim's fairly harsh rhetoric with respect to the South Korean leadership, which was called upon to be guided by the "nation's interests" and to act in unison with the North, rather than subordinating to the "external forces." He views this as an attempt to exercise psychological pressure on Moon Jae-in and adds that such rude tactics would hardly inspire Seoul to act on the North's behalf. That Kim gave Trump "until the year end" to come up with proposals that could be acceptable to Pyongyang, Toloraya sees as another pressure tactic by the North Korean leader. Kim is well aware that the year 2020 will be dominated by elections both for Trump and Moon. Another tense standoff with North Korea is something they hardly want to confront during an election season. Yet, a return to a war scare around the Korean Peninsula looks quite realistic. If, in the end, the events take such a grim turn, Toloraya argues, the blame could not be put entirely on Pyongyang, as its proposals for the phased and gradual, "action for action" approach to denuclearization are quite reasonable.³

Konstantin Asmolov agrees with Toloraya, viewing Hanoi as a temporary setback, rather than as a complete failure. Asmolov gives three possible, mutually non-exclusive explanations for why the sides failed to reach an agreement. All of them mainly have to do with American domestic politics. First, there is the White House national security advisor John Bolton, whose excessive demands to the North during the second day of the Hanoi talks might have killed the chance for an agreement. Asmolov characterizes Bolton as a "typical representative of the messianic thinking common to the American establishment, which resembles the mindset of the Islamic fanatics or Comintern activists." Such people do not negotiate—they present ultimatums. The second explanation, according to Asmolov, can be found in the strong resistance by the national security bureaucracy and by many influential experts to Trump's policy of engagement with the North. They view Trump's North Korea policy as either utterly incompetent or as a waste of time because the North cannot be trusted and has never intended to denuclearize. Third, Trump's decision to walk out of the summit with no agreement was pre-determined by the atmosphere created by the U.S. mainstream liberal media in the run-up to Hanoi, which kept saying that Trump would be willing to sign a deal with Kim, even if it involved unilateral concessions by the U.S., in order to paint it as a major foreign policy victory. Trump realized that under such circumstances, any deal with Pyongyang would be portrayed by his domestic enemies exclusively as an attempt to boost his sagging political fortunes. Therefore, he chose to refrain from making an agreement with Kim, which, short of Pyongyang's full surrender, would inevitably be lambasted by Trump's opponents as a sell-out of American national interests. At the same

time, even in the absence of an agreement, the status quo basically suits Trump as long as Kim refrains from nuclear and missile tests and the sanctions regime remains in place. As a result, Trump emerged from Hanoi as a firm negotiator, who staunchly defends American interests. Asmolov thinks that Trump's decision to walk out of the talks with Kim did work as intended, sparing him a likely barrage of criticism from his political opponents.

Asmolov believes that continuation of the post-Hanoi dialogue depends more on Trump than on Kim. He forecasts that Trump could aim for a third summit with Kim when he feels more confident in terms of the domestic political situation. Asmolov argues that Kim, too, continues to be interested in negotiations with the U.S. Kim might even make some goodwill gesture in order to underscore his willingness for engagement and invite reciprocal moves from Trump. At the same time, the Hanoi summit had a negative impact on inter-Korean relations, leading to further delays in the South-North projects and contributing to a decline in Moon's approval ratings.⁴

Andrei Lankov, currently based at Kookmin University, is convinced that Pyongyang is extremely keen to continue negotiations with the U.S. The DPRK's leadership will never completely abandon nuclear weapons, but they are ready for some compromise and are, in fact, eager for it. This is why Pyongyang is signaling that, unless Washington shows willingness to negotiate based on reasonable mutual concessions, the DPRK could create major problems for Washington and personally for Trump. One obvious way of putting pressure on Trump post-Hanoi would be to resume the launches of long-range ballistic missiles. Since late November 2017, Pyongyang has been observing a self-imposed moratorium on such launches. Speaking through First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui, the DPRK leadership sent a message that the moratorium may be reversed. Resumption of ballistic flights would be a big blow to Trump, who has hailed the absence of North Korean missile activities as his major achievement.

According to Lankov, Pyongyang does not want to significantly escalate the tensions on the peninsula, fearing Trump's unpredictability. The North Korean leadership well remembers how Trump threatened war in 2017 and probably was serious about it. If escalation happens now, it may not be as dangerous for North Korea as it was back in 2017. China has returned to its traditional policy of providing low-profile support to the DPRK, while South Korea is presently ruled by the leftist nationalists who favor engagement and peaceful coexistence with the North. That said, Pyongyang's current main aim is negotiations with Trump, rather than ratcheting up tensions. Negotiations should not lead to full denuclearization, but to some limitations on the North's nuclear weapons in exchange for political and economic concessions from the U.S. It remains to be seen, Lankov notes, whether Trump will get Pyongyang's message that his reliance on hard-liners such as Bolton could cost him dearly.⁵

Igor Pankratenko identifies Beijing as the main beneficiary of the Hanoi summit. Pankratenko argues that China's apparent non-interference in the Pyongyang-Washington diplomacy is deliberate deception. In reality, Beijing closely follows the North Korean-U.S. dialogue. More than that, the Chinese are writing its script. Pankratenko claims that Beijing seeks to use its influence over North Korea as leverage in its all-important relationship with Washington. Pankratenko goes as far as to suggest that, during his visit to Beijing in January 2019, Kim Jong-un received guidelines from Xi Jinping on how to conduct talks with Trump. The Chinese wanted the Hanoi summit to fail, and they succeeded in that. After Hanoi, the

U.S.-DPRK negotiations are doomed to drag on without any results, unless Trump asks Xi for assistance and mediation. Beijing would be happy to oblige, but only in exchange for American readiness to accommodate Chinese wishes in the ongoing trade talks.⁶

The effect of sanctions on North Korea and whether sanctions determined Kim's behavior at Hanoi is a controversial issue on which Russian commentators, even those who belong to the neutral group, do not have a uniform opinion. The article in *Izvestiya* written by Natalya Portyakova claims that the North's economy has been noticeably deteriorating due to the impact of crippling sanctions.⁷ Oleg Kiryanov has a different opinion. He notes that the economic situation in North Korea, albeit not excellent, is bearable, allowing Kim Jong-un to patiently wait, probably until the arrival of the next U.S. president, if Pyongyang meets no success in dealing with Trump.⁸ Lankov emphasizes that the situation with the sanctions is mixed. On the one hand, the currency exchange rate as well as the price of rice and other essentials remain relatively stable. On the other hand, there are mounting indirect signs of troubles in the economy, with a serious food crisis as a distinct possibility.⁹ Lankov believes that the worsening economic situation, caused by sanctions, led the North Korean delegation to put the issue of sanctions relaxation at the top of the agenda. Regardless of the extent the sanctions may or may not be impacting the North's well-being, almost all commentators are convinced that no amount of economic hardship would force the regime in Pyongyang to renounce its nuclear program.

Pro-DPRK Commentary

This group includes prominent Russian experts who exhibit varying degrees of pro-North Korean sympathies, depicting Pyongyang as an existential survivor that needs nuclear weapons for deterrence and self-defense. They tend to put the onus on the U.S., seeing Washington, not Pyongyang, as a villain and the main destabilizing force in Northeast Asia. Alexander Zhebin views Trump's efforts at engagement with the North as part of a larger strategic plan, in which denuclearization may not necessarily be the main goal. Writing a few weeks prior to the Hanoi summit, Zhebin refers to some unnamed American think tanks close to the U.S. government, which allegedly have drawn up a blueprint to strengthen American positions in Northeast Asia by building a new security system there. This system would involve American security guarantees to both South and North Korea. The objective is to form a "trilateral partnership" that would, firstly, preclude Chinese domination of the Korean Peninsula; secondly, create a counterbalance to China in the Asia-Pacific; and, thirdly, reassure Japan. According to Zhebin, the U.S. strategists count that Pyongyang, despite some recent normalization with China, would be receptive to this plan because it deeply distrusts Beijing and fears its rise. Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign, combined with promises of security and prosperity underwritten by the U.S., should persuade the Pyongyang regime to accept this plan. However, Zhebin is doubtful that such a plan will work with Pyongyang. Even though the North Koreans are eager for rapprochement with the Americans, they are unlikely to abandon China, which was underscored by Kim's trips to Beijing prior to his summits with the U.S. and ROK presidents. Furthermore, Zhebin argues, the Trump administration's interference in the Venezuelan crisis against the Maduro regime cannot but signal to Pyongyang that similar techniques might be used elsewhere.¹⁰

In his post-Hanoi comments, Zhebin opined that North Korea, albeit interested in talks with the U.S., is wary of any far-reaching deals with Trump because after Trump leaves, either at

the end of his election term or as a result of impeachment, the next administration could easily reverse all agreements made by him. As Zhebin notes, the North Koreans have had enough negative experience of such a kind when U.S. presidential administrations have changed in the past.¹¹ Still, Zhebin thinks that even after the Hanoi talks fell apart, the two sides retain a stake in the continuation of dialogue. They have some mutual interests, which makes future progress possible in the negotiations.¹²

In early February of 2019, Alexander Vorontsov gave a relatively upbeat forecast for the second U.S.-DPRK summit. He predicted that the meeting in Vietnam could provide a significant impetus toward bilateral normalization. However, Vorontsov hedged his bets by pointing out that the U.S. policy toward North Korea is made at two levels, which creates a lot of uncertainty. On the one hand, there is the presidential policy of Donald Trump who seems eager to establish friendship with Kim. On the other hand, there is “the policy of the U.S. establishment” many of whose members insist on a hard line with North Korea and demand its full denuclearization before removal of sanctions. The establishment also worries that rapid rapprochement with North Korea will undermine Washington’s alliance with Seoul. Vorontsov opined that, given his unpredictability and unorthodoxy, Trump could afford to do something during the summit that would go against the bureaucracy’s wisdom.¹³

As it later turned out, Trump was either unwilling or unable to overrule his lieutenants at the Hanoi summit who apparently demanded much bigger concessions from Kim, partly proving Vorontsov’s assessment about Washington’s two-level North Korea policy. After Hanoi, Vorontsov still saw opportunities for diplomacy, including a third Trump-Kim summit. South Korea’s Moon was to play the key mediating role in the U.S.-North Korea dialogue. The U.S. insistence on a “big deal” at Hanoi—the North’s immediate denuclearization in exchange for the removal of sanctions and normalization of political relations with the U.S.—is, according to Vorontsov, no more than a negotiating tactic. The only realistic path toward denuclearization is an incremental, phased process.¹⁴

Gleb Ivashentsov, Russia’s former ambassador to Seoul, and current vice president of the Russian International Affairs Council, published an essay in March 2019 in which he reflects on the causes of the Korean nuclear problem and possible paths to its solution.¹⁵ Ivashentsov argues that the problems on the Korean Peninsula have two main components. The greatest emphasis is placed on North Korea’s nuclear crisis, but there is another component, the inter-Korean crisis, with the Korean nation being split into two separate states for over seventy years. Should Pyongyang abandon its nuclear program, this action, in and of itself, would not put an end to the North-South confrontation. At the same time, inter-Korean normalization could provide a powerful impetus to resolving the nuclear problem since North Korea’s nuclear missile program is a result of the confrontation between the two Koreas, with the U.S. siding with South Korea for over six decades.

Ivashentsov sees Trump’s turn from threatening a military strike against Pyongyang to holding the first summit with the North Korean leader as largely a forced move. Moon Jae-in’s perseverance in the cause of inter-Korean détente and the negative international sentiment concerning military actions against North Korea that threatened a nuclear war, played their part. On the other hand, U.S. allies were unwilling to become involved in new reckless U.S. escapades in North Korea, with that unwillingness clearly manifested in

Vancouver where a ministerial-level meeting was held in January 2018 between the states that had participated in the Korean War as part of the UN forces in Korea. Ivashentsov sees North Korea as being genuinely interested in a détente with the U.S. He suggests that future North Korea-U.S. relations could achieve the level of today's U.S.-Vietnam ties when the war is remembered, but that memories of the past do not hinder partnership in the present. He speculates that this might have been the thought behind the decision to choose Hanoi as a venue for the second North Korea-U.S. summit.

Explaining why the Hanoi talks fell apart, Ivashentsov puts the responsibility squarely on Washington. Pyongyang had the right to expect that stopping nuclear tests and eliminating the Punggye-ri nuclear test site would result in the lifting of at least some of the sanctions. Washington, however, continued to insist on keeping all sanctions in place until North Korea's complete nuclear disarmament. Ivashentsov also emphasizes Trump's precarious domestic situation and asks: is Kim Jong-un interested in going all in on Donald Trump, given the latter's favorable attitude toward the North Korean leader? Ivashentsov believes it is in Kim's interest to delay any specific agreements to insure himself against Trump's successor reneging on all the commitments, just like Trump today is withdrawing from the agreements concluded by his predecessors.

Envisioning a way forward, Ivashentsov advocates a return to the format of the Six-Party Talks (the two Koreas, the U.S., China, Russia, and Japan), which should be based on a stage-by-stage approach using the "action for action" principle. He proposes that North Korea's nuclear program should be separated from its missile program. The DPRK's nuclear status is enshrined in its constitution and this currently appears to be non-negotiable for Pyongyang. At the same time, guarantees of non-proliferation by the North of its missile and nuclear technologies and putting a freeze on its missile program could be discussed. The exacerbation in North Korea-U.S. relations in 2017 was primarily prompted by the North Koreans developing a missile that could deliver a strike against the continental U.S. According to Ivashentsov, the U.S. is mostly concerned with North Korea's ICBMs. Pyongyang could stop developing ICBMs, freeze production of nuclear materials, and open its nuclear facilities for international inspections. In exchange, Washington should officially recognize North Korea, establish diplomatic relations, exchange embassies, curtail military activities close to its borders, scale back and ultimately lift the sanctions, and provide economic and energy aid to the North. Ivashentsov further argues that a peace treaty on the Korean Peninsula should be signed by the two independent sovereign states, North Korea and South Korea, possibly with guarantees provided by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council: Russia, China, the U.S., the UK, and France.

Ivashentsov concludes that achieving complete trust on the Korean Peninsula is hardly possible in the foreseeable future, but that a certain degree of confidence is a feasible goal. Despite the limited nature of their results, the summits in Panmunjom, Pyongyang, Singapore, and Hanoi could serve as starting points in moving toward lasting solutions.

Anti-DPRK Commentary

Vassily Mikheev is one of the very few senior Russian experts who openly criticize the DPRK as an inhumane, totalitarian regime which cannot be trusted. Commenting in the run-up to the Hanoi summit, Mikheev predicted that the Trump-Kim second meeting would probably

produce some declaration but no specific deliverables. Mikheev sees an irreconcilable gap between Washington and Pyongyang's positions. The U.S. demands full denuclearization while North Korea views nuclear weapons as the only reliable guarantee of its security. According to Mikheev, Pyongyang seeks for itself something akin to the Indian status, which is *de facto*, albeit not *de jure*, recognition as a nuclear-weapons state. North Korea wants to split the process of denuclearization into multiple stages in order to rake in rewards, such as sanctions relaxation, for each of them. Mikheev believes there is a risk that Trump might agree to North Korean proposals for a step-by-step process. If it happens, Mikheev argues, it will be a big mistake of American diplomacy. Pyongyang will cheat on denuclearization and, in the end, will consolidate its nuclear status, resulting in the Indian option. Mikheev holds that such a scenario will be fundamentally detrimental to the nuclear non-proliferation regime and will harm the interests of Russia as one of its main guarantors and beneficiaries. Russia, Mikheev asserts, has always been against North Korea gaining a nuclear status.¹⁶

The Vladivostok Summit of Putin and Kim

On April 24-26, 2019, Kim Jong-un made his first official trip to Russia and held a meeting with Vladimir Putin on Russky Island in Vladivostok. Kim's first visit to Russia was supposed to take place much earlier: in May 2015 the Kremlin expected him for the celebrations marking the 70th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany, but, in the end, Kim chose to stay home. Had Kim come to Moscow then, it would have become his first foreign visit as North Korea's supreme leader. In hindsight, Kim's failure to make an appearance at Moscow's Victory Day parade in 2015 looks like a prescient move to save his first foreign trip for China, even though Pyongyang's political relations with Beijing were at their nadir back then. For all the twists and turns of the Sino-North Korean relationship, the leadership in Pyongyang was likely aware all the time that China was, and would remain, the North's main benefactor. Eventually it was to Beijing that Kim Jong-un paid his first foreign visit, in March 2018, in an obvious show of deference to China's Xi Jinping.

However, sooner or later, Kim's trip to Russia was inevitable. Russia is an important and generally friendly neighbor as well as a great power with a veto at the UN Security Council. Also, in terms of maintaining a dynastic tradition, both Kim's father and grandfather visited the Soviet Union and Russia multiple times. Kim had a standing invitation since May 2018 when Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov visited Pyongyang and, on behalf of Putin, invited the North's supreme leader to come to Russia. According to some reports in the Russian press, the Kremlin began pushing for Kim's visit after the announcement of the first U.S.-DPRK summit, which came as a surprise to Moscow.¹⁷

Throughout 2018 and up to the Hanoi summit Kim was too busy pursuing summit diplomacy with the United States, South Korea, and China. He apparently did not have much time left for Russia, relegating relations with Moscow to his lieutenants and diplomats. Post-Hanoi, when the diplomatic process with Washington—and Seoul—stalled, Kim's calculations, and schedule, changed. There were few major world leaders with whom Kim could have meaningful meetings. He had already been to China four times and another visit there would underscore Pyongyang's excessive reliance on Beijing. So, Russia looked like the most

logical choice for Kim. He could expect a warm reception that would boost his international and domestic prestige and demonstrate that Pyongyang had close friends beyond China and Cuba.

Putin also desired this summit, but needed it less than Kim. For Moscow, a summit with North Korea was important mostly for international prestige. It was to symbolically reaffirm Russia's traditional great-power role as a major player on the Korean Peninsula, whose influence on Korean affairs might be smaller than that of the United States and China but bigger than that of Japan. Kim's stakes in this summit were higher, given that the prospects for ending the U.S.-led economic isolation of North Korea significantly dimmed after Hanoi. Subjected to a virtual economic blockade, Kim needed friends and allies who would be willing to help him out. For Kim, Russia was one of the very few remaining options to get some relief and survive a difficult period.

We do not know precisely what Russian and North Korean leaders discussed during their three-hour talks, but it seems few, if any, concrete agreements or decisions were made. In his public statements after the summit, Putin sounded noncommittal regarding any new political, diplomatic, and economic support for North Korea. Kim apparently failed to get Putin to commit to any substantial aid to the North. Moscow was unwilling to unilaterally relax the sanctions, such as allowing North Korean guest workers to stay in Russia in defiance of the UN Security Council resolutions, or providing an economic lifeline to the North in any other form. For one thing, Russia was loath to undercut the authority of the UNSC, the most important global governance institution, in which Moscow is hugely invested as a founding and veto-holding member. Moreover, it was hard to think of any scenario where Russia would return to the Soviet pattern of being a major donor for the DPRK. Moscow provides direct and indirect subsidies only to those states which it sees as belonging to a Russian sphere of influence and, in exchange, they must toe the Kremlin's political line. North Korea is neither seen as being within the Russian sphere of influence nor likely to take any political directions from Moscow. One indirect indication that Kim was not entirely happy with the summit's outcome was his decision to cut short his visit to Vladivostok and depart earlier than initially planned.

The denuclearization issue was the other key topic on the agenda discussed by Putin and Kim. In this regard, too, the summit appears to have produced little. Kim did not bring to Vladivostok any new proposals different from those Pyongyang had already presented at Hanoi. After the talks with Kim, Putin hinted at Kim's pertinacity: "he (Kim) is determined to defend his country's national interests and to maintain its security."¹⁸ Putin did not sound like he was very enthusiastic about playing a mediation role between Pyongyang and Washington, only promising to convey North Korea's position to the U.S. leadership. Even if Kim had wanted any mediation from Russia, which is in itself a questionable proposition given Pyongyang's eagerness for direct talks with Washington, it is far from certain that Putin would have personally committed to any major mediation effort for North Korea. Putin has been familiar with the Korean problem for almost two decades, since he made a visit to Pyongyang in 2000. He is perfectly aware of how intractable the Korean knot is. He also knows that mediation between North Korea and the U.S. is a thankless job, with low chances of success. Another reason Putin may not want to become too much

involved in the Korean conundrum is his preoccupation with the Middle East, where the Kremlin established itself as a kingmaker and has got real leverage. Putin's main geopolitical game is currently there, rather than on the Korean Peninsula.

There were concerns among many in Washington that Putin might try to use the summit to throw a wrench into the American efforts to get North Korea to denuclearize.¹⁹ However, there were few signs that the Kremlin sought to be a spoiler on North Korea. Meeting with Kim, Putin was hardly interested in antagonizing Donald Trump, for whom North Korea is a personal foreign policy priority. Aside from that, there are more fundamental reasons why Russia has a stake in resolving the Korean Peninsula nuclear problem, rather than exacerbating it. For one, Russia is concerned about a possible armed conflagration on its borders that could result from a collapse of the denuclearization diplomacy. Even more importantly, Russia is invested in preserving the global non-proliferation regime, no less so than the United States. Even though North Korea's nukes do not directly threaten Russia, Moscow is loath to see more nuclear powers in the international system, if only because it devalues Russia's own nuclear-weapon status upon which Russia's great-power standing is based to a significant extent. During his post-summit news conference, Putin emphasized that guarding the non-proliferation regime is one shared interest between Moscow and Washington.²⁰ That said, Russia is quite realistic that North Korea's full denuclearization, as demanded by the U.S., is nearly impossible in the foreseeable future, which was again stressed by Putin in Vladivostok.

Spending just a few hours in Vladivostok conversing and dining with Kim, Putin left his North Korean guest and departed for Beijing, where he would spend three days attending Xi Jinping's Belt and Road forum. This served as a symbolic sign that Russia's North Korea policy is subordinated to Moscow's quasi-alliance with China. Moscow seems to have tacitly recognized that most of East Asia, including the peninsula, is China's sphere of influence. In recent years, Russia's policies with respect to the North have been closely coordinated, and aligned, with China's, and Moscow has generally been playing second fiddle to Beijing. This is unlikely to change as long as Russia and China continue to sustain and strengthen their "strategic partnership."²¹

Most of the Russian expert commentary was moderate in its assessments of the Putin-Kim meeting. According to Toloraya, it largely had symbolic significance, restoring Russia's position in the settlement of the Korean problem. Also, after the Russia-DPRK summit, the resumption of multilateral (possibly, six-party), talks became more likely. However, Toloraya reads Putin's statements in Vladivostok as indicating that a multilateral format will be possible only once progress is achieved in the U.S.-North Korea negotiations. Third countries would be needed, then, to create a system of international security guarantees for the DPRK.²²

Dmitry Trenin sees the Putin-Kim rendezvous as a side-show in the continuing saga between Pyongyang and Washington. Russia seeks to score diplomatic points by demonstrating its relevance, while North Korea tries to do the same by showing it has options.²³ Alexander Gabuev argues that the Vladivostok summit brought Moscow back into the diplomatic game focused on the Korean Peninsula. Still, Russia does not have a very strong hand in the Korea crisis resolution. The tools Russia has at its disposal are too limited to have an impact on the calculations and behavior of North Korea or the U.S. Moreover, as asymmetry in the

Sino-Russian entente gradually grows in China's favor, Moscow is increasingly receptive to Beijing's agenda regarding the Korean Peninsula. Russia could, however, be an indispensable partner in a broader conversation on security mechanisms in Northeast Asia, including offensive weapons and missile defense systems. Gabuev points out that the current lack of this broader conversation makes a solution to the North Korean nuclear issue less likely, if not impossible.²⁴

The thesis that Russia's policy on North Korea is closely aligned with Beijing's agenda has lately become more common among Russian experts. While some of them, like Gabuev, see it as an inevitable consequence of Moscow's growing geo-economic dependence on China, others refuse to accept it and call for Russia to play a more independent role on the peninsula. Anastassia Barannikova writes that Russian policies toward the peninsula are passive and merely support China's line. As Barannikova argues, "Russia gave up on Korea, allowing China to do what it pleases, even being cognizant that such a state of affairs does not suit the DPRK and is detrimental to Russia's image in Northeast Asia." Barannikova warns that, if Russia continues to play second fiddle to China and fails to balance Beijing on the Korean Peninsula, Pyongyang may lose interest in Moscow and turn to Washington, which is already happening.²⁵ She predicts that eventually the DPRK will rejoin the international community while managing to keep its nuclear weapons. Thus, it is in Russia's interest to invest now in strong relations with a neighboring nuclear state.

Endnotes

- ¹ Georgy Toloraya, "Commentary on the Hanoi summit," *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, February 28, 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/02/28/tramp-i-kim-chen-yn-ne-smogli-dogovoritsia.html>.
- ² Georgy Toloraya, "Trump i Kim dogovorilis' poka ne dogovarivat'sya," *Russian International Affairs Council*, March 6, 2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/interview/tramp-i-kim-dogovorilis-poka-ne-dogovarivatsya/>.
- ³ Georgy Toloraya, "Otvetni khod Kim Chen Una: poslanie opponentam," *Russian International Affairs Council*, April 15, 2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/otvetnyy-khod-kim-chen-yna-poslanie-opponentam/>.
- ⁴ Konstantin Asmolov, "Pochemu ne udalsia vtoroi summit Donal'd Trampa i Kim Chen Una," *Russian International Affairs Council*, March 6, 2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/pochemu-ne-udalsya-vtoroy-sammit-donalda-trampa-i-kim-chen-yna/>.
- ⁵ Andrei Lankov, "Udastsia li Pkhenyanu usadit' Trampa za stol peregovorov?" *Valdai International Discussion Club*, March 18, 2019, <http://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/pkhenyan-tramp-stol/>.
- ⁶ Igor Pankratenko, "Donald Trump + Kim Chen Un = Tovarishch Xi Jinping," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, March 3, 2019, http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-03-03/8_7522_sammit.html.
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