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Security Challenges on the Korean Peninsula

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The View from Russia

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t a Russo-Korean summit in August 2011 Kim Jong-il announced his willingness ${f A}$ to resume the Six-Party Talks without preconditions, i.e. no denuclearization or apologies. He also accepted Moscow's long-standing idea of a trans-Korean gas pipeline from Siberia through the DPRK to the ROK that would give North Korea \$100 million annually once it opened in 2017 while it shipped ten BCM annually to South Korea for thirty years. Kim also agreed to establish a commission to explore the possibility of building this pipeline. Subsequently, the two Koreas have started separate discussions with the Russians about the pipeline. Moscow also joined in joint naval search and rescue operations and is discussing forgiving up to 90% of Pyongyang's debts, if not the whole amount of about \$11 billion. The centurylong dream of a Trans-Siberian and Trans-Korean railway (TSR-TKR) looms in many discussions of future relations.1

To grasp Russia's Korea policies we must go beyond assessing Russia's bilateral policies toward North and South Korea to examine its policies in their regional, if not global, context. This entails realizing that whenever any member of the Six-Party process acts towards another member it generates dynamic consequences among all of the parties, making the talks an N+5 game that is constantly being played in multi-dimensional terms. A purely bilateral explanation is insufficient. Russia's policy must be seen in the context of its overall Northeast Asia policy. Russia views the Korean issue and the Six-Party Talks primarily as a regional security challenge and only secondly as a proliferation issue, while the United States views them primarily within a nonproliferation context. Moreover, the two strands dovetail to foster a Russian policy that ultimately obstructs any progress in dealing with the problems at hand.

This cognitive asymmetry with Washington has consequences for Moscow's policy and broader efforts to resolve this complex agenda. For instance, Irina Mironova writes that,

Thus, the peninsula's main problem consists not in the North Korean nuclear program per se or unification as it is. The problem consists in the virtual absence of relations between the two Koreas and is further exacerbated by the fact that there are not only Korean interests at play but there are also a number of players that pursue their own, quite explicit, interests on the peninsula, including China. The actions of Northeast Asian countries are guided by security considerations. "DPRK became the focus of rivalry between China and the United States which were further compounded by the lack of understanding of what is happening inside North Korea." Tensions are being expressed through two sets of controversies: China-United States and China-South Korea.²

Thus, it is all Washington's fault and nonprolfieration is a secondary issue that need not be urgently addressed. Georgy Toloraya similarly attributes the tensions of 2010 to South Korea's post-2008 policies that presumed the DPRK's impending collapse. Allegedly, this policy forced North Korea to employ its most potent policy, escalation and force majeure to torpedo the Cheonan in March 2010 and shell Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010.³ Blaming the victim poses Korean issues in a regional security context between, first, the two Koreas, and, second, the United States and China with Seoul and Washington to blame. Nuclear proliferation becomes a secondary issue. Therefore Moscow can say that early resumption of the Six-Party Talks is up to the two Koreas and the United States, since Russia and China have successfully prevented the "chronic" conflict there from becoming an armed one.4

This linkage between regional security and strategic agendas features prominently in Russian thinking about security in Europe and Asia. As Jacob Kipp wrote,

For Russia, which inherited the Soviet nuclear arsenal, but has faced a serious change in its international position, the nuclear equation is, in fact, shaped by Russia's status as a regional power in a complex Eurasian security environment, where nuclear issues are not defined exclusively by the US-Russian strategic nuclear equation but by security dynamics involving interactions with Russia's immediate periphery. On the one hand, Russia's security responses have been shaped by a post-Soviet decade of sharp internal political crises, economic transformation, social instability, demographic decline, and the collapse of conventional military power. The impact of these developments has been uneven across Russia, leading to very distinct security environments which have demanded regional responses. The initial focus of security concerns for both the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation was primarily upon European security. This was the primary focus of the US-Soviet strategic competition and the place where its militarization was most evident.⁵

Russian officials have repeatedly confirmed this view. They apparently fear that any regional crisis, regardless of intentions, could become a wider or more protracted war with risks and costs to Russia. On November 17, 2011, Chief of Staff, General Nikolai Makarov, stated that local conflicts are occurring around the former Soviet perimeter and could escalate into all-out war involving nuclear weapons.⁶ He echoed his predecessor General Yuri Baluyevsky that while Russia faced no direct threat of aggression, "[given] the existence of nuclear weapons, any localized armed conflict—let alone a regional conflict—could lead the international community to the brink of a global war."7

This wider lens of global competition informs Moscow's approach to all regional crises in areas viewed as strategic to its interests. Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of Russia's Security Council, recently stated that,

Over the past two decades, 95% of conflicts affecting global and regional security started as domestic ones....Threats and conflicts inside certain countries quickly go the regional and also global level. This is particularly noticeable in the case of North Africa and the Middle East, in particular, in Libya, and now in Syria.8

Moscow thus implicitly believes that the United States and its allies frequently employ coercive tactics if not outright force against objectionable governments, including proliferators like North Korea, to force regime change upon them, and that these policies aggravate difficult issues, generating intractable crises if not prolonged wars (Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and North Korea) that negatively affect international security. U.S. policies jeopardize Russian interests because they enlarge the scope of U.S. dominance and, at least, implicitly subject Russian policy to external scrutiny and pressure. Its interests also suffer because these objectionable or rogue states are, not coincidentally, Russia's partners against U.S. power. Therefore, international intervention must be subjected exclusively to the UN Security Council, where Russia has a veto.9

Accordingly, counterbalancing the United States is a fundamental motive of Russian policy. While some of this sentiment derives from the visceral official anti-Americanism of 2000-11, its deeper roots lie in the elite Russian perception that "Russia can reassert itself as a global great power only if it is able to limit American influence." Therefore, Moscow identifies with China on an anti-American and antiliberal program in Asia despite its mounting concern about rising Chinese power and seeks its own line of influence in North Korea, e.g. in the 2011 summit with Kim Jong-il. 10 Russian analysts, if not officials, see South Korea's post-2008 harder line and U.S. policies as being primarily responsible for North Korea's admitted adventurism and suspect Washington of still seeking regime change under the guise of coerced denuclearization. 11 They blame Washington and Seoul as much if not more than Pyongyang for the steady increase in tensions in 2010, which Russian diplomacy has sought to stop, often together with Beijing. 12

REGIONAL SECURITY PERSPECTIVE

The 2010 upsurge of tensions near Russia's borders harmed its interests, causing the suspension of the Six-Party Talks, the only venue where Moscow can formally assert itself in the region, and straining relations with both Koreas, the United States, and China.¹³ Since a war on the Korean peninsula would be disastrous to Russia raising the possibility of a Sino-American clash on its frontier, potential nuclear strikes with radioactive fallout, state collapse in North Korea with uncertain command and control over nuclear weapons, large refugee flows, and the complete disruption of Northeast Asian investment and technology transfer into the Russian economy, Russians reason that actions generating heightened tensions or outright conflict must be avoided at all costs. 14 Moreover, in the Asia-Pacific region many military contingencies are becoming increasingly possible as China's military threats to Russia grow and the U.S. alliance system has strengthened. The threat of a Korean contingency clearly figures prominently in Russian threat assessments. The Vostok-2010 combined arms exercise, the largest one in Russian history had scenarios against South Korea, a war in North Korea, Japan, and China, and ended with the use of a tactical nuclear weapon against what was clearly a PLA surrogate, but it could also have been deployed against U.S. allies if they intruded into Russian territory. This exercise is part of an ongoing defense buildup throughout the Russian Far East (RFE). In 2009 Russia deployed S-400 surface to air missiles to the RFE against potential spillover from North Korean missile and nuclear tests. 15 In 2011 it deployed S-400s on the Kurile Islands, ostensibly against Japan and the United States, but probably also against China and to hedge against a Korean contingency.¹⁶ Similarly, Russia's new plans for naval construction, especially in the RFE are extensive. All in all thirty-six submarines and forty surface ships are to be added by 2020.¹⁷ These plans betray a reorientation of Russia's naval emphasis to the Asia-Pacific, and to a new emphasis on meeting the challenge posed by China's naval buildup, but they also could figure in a Korean-inspired contingency. 18

A 2010 article in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' journal International Affairs, quoting a Chinese analyst Zhu Feng, starkly underlined the dangers of war in Korea.

Indeed, the situation on the Korean Peninsula, which is in close proximity to our Far Eastern borders, is explosive and fraught with the most unpredictable consequences. Peace is very fragile here. No one can guarantee that it will not collapse as a result of a clash between the two Koreas with the involvement of other countries in the conflict and the use of weapons of mass destruction. "The aggravation of the North Korean nuclear issue is one of the long standing problems leading to new ones. This issue cannot be expected to be settled easily because difficulties have emerged in relations among large East Asian states. The settlement process can subsequently lead to a redistribution of roles of large states on the Asian political field—that is a new regional security problem."19

That restructuring of the Asian political order could easily ensue at Russia's expense given its weakness there, and do so by means over which Russia has little or no influence. While Moscow has long said that it does not fear Korean unification and might actually welcome it, Russia could only do so if it happened peacefully not through war.²⁰

These considerations help explain why Deputy Foreign Minister Alexei Borodavkin, Moscow's delegate to the talks, said that the Korean peninsula was on the brink of war in September 2010.²¹ Indeed, North Korea agreed with this estimate while South Korea has pledged retaliation for any future Northern provocations.²² Since then, there have been multiple signs of intensified military hedging by both North and South Korea against the possibility of a renewed conflict. Consequently Russia faces a situation where a major conflict affecting its vital interests might ignite where it had little or no leverage on any of the players and could not prevent it. Since the Cheonan incident and shelling of Yeonpyeong island demonstrated its lack of leverage, not only were its vital interests at considerable risk, it also faced marginalization in the talks and regionally. This marginalization was reflected in the fact that everyone implored China, not Russia, for solutions despite their similar policy posture. Worse yet for Russia this picture of marginalization evidently reflected Asian perceptions. A U.S. Army colonel, who leads officers on tours of Asian think tanks, told a U.S. conference on Korea in 2010 that Chinese, Japanese, South Korean, and Mongolian think tanks unanimously asserted that Russia would soon play no role in East Asian security.²³

These considerations had to be galling especially as Dmitry Medvedev's presidency has emphasized Asia. Russian officials and analysts have asserted a new coherence, purpose, and vigor in Russia's Asian policy, claiming that Russian foreign policy's center of gravity was shifting to the East.²⁴ According to Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin, Medvedev identified three main thrusts of his foreign policy: relations with the West, the CIS, and the Asia-Pacific region (APR).²⁵ Russian officials acknowledge Asia as the dynamo of the global economy and assert an emerging "polycentric world order" largely composed of rising Asian powers. 26 To play in this new order, Russia must ensure favorable conditions for its modernization, elicit large-scale foreign investment, participate in Asian integration and other processes, and propose a new Asian order free of military blocs (i.e. the U.S. alliance system). ²⁷Consequently, it vigorously pursues summitry, high-level diplomatic meetings and speeches, energy, and arms sales, its main currencies of power in East Asia. As it has done since Brezhnev, it "proceed(s) from the assumption that one of the most important prerequisites and components of the denuclearization process is the formation of regional common security institutions which would be based on the principle of equal security to all parties."28

Moscow's Korean initiative was an effort, often joined by China, to bring everyone back to the Six-Party Talks, but it also reflected an independent quest for leverage vis-à-vis the two Koreas, using the best and perhaps only real weapon at its disposal, namely energy. These actions paid off for Moscow at the August 2011 summit. Russian analysts, if not officials, believe that Northeast Asia offers Russia opportunities due to its energy capabilities, the region's dynamism, Europe's and the U.S. decline due to the protracted global economic crisis, and what its elites claim is the validity and vitality of its (and China's) leadership model.²⁹

THE PROLIFERATION STANDPOINT

Moscow and Washington's approaches to nonproliferation issues sharply diverge, underscoring the wide conceptual and perceptual gaps between them. This poses significant challenges to any enduring reset policy let alone amity and genuine cooperation on international security. Given Russia's ambition to challenge the United States regionally by counterbalancing it, the result is a set of contending issues where Russia sees its rival as threatening principles and interests that it deems central to its security. Moscow firmly opposes adding new members to the nuclear club and regards proliferation as a threat; therefore, it works with Washington to eliminate "loose nukes" and discourage other states from expanding earlier nuclear programs, and it has stringent export control procedures established in law.³⁰ Nonetheless, on proliferation issues it follows its own interests, putting this fifth in the new defense doctrine after a series of U.S.-inspired threats, including NATO enlargement and missile defenses. The doctrine explicitly states that Russia expects that by 2020 it will be living in a proliferated world,31 where the number of nuclear weapon states has increased.³² It is certainly strange to concede proliferation in advance. Leaders also publicly say that this is mainly a U.S., not necessarily a Russian, concern. In early 2002 Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov outlined Russian thinking and policy concerning proliferation.

Russia scrupulously adheres to its international obligations in the sphere of non-proliferation of mass destruction weapons, means of their delivery, and corresponding technologies. The key criteria of Russian policy in this sphere are our own national security, the strengthening of our country's international positions and the preservation of its great power status.³³

Russia evaluates proliferation issues not according to whether the regime is democratic or not, but on whether a country's nuclearization would seriously threaten Russia and its interests.³⁴ Accordingly, it views U.S. nonproliferation policy cynically, displaying a visible Schadenfreude when North Korea tested missiles and then a nuclear weapon in July-October 2006.35 Officials often view Washington's insistence on nonproliferation controls as mainly an effort to pressure competitors in nuclear and arms markets.³⁶ In 2009 Alexei Arbatov provided the most detailed explication of Russia's approach.

For Russia the acquisition of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles by India and Pakistan and the prospects of further proliferation are adding some new elements to a familiar and old threat, rather than creating a dramatic new one, as is the case with the United States. The USSR and Russia have learned to live with this threat and to deal with it on the basis of nuclear deterrence, some limited defenses (like the Moscow BMD system and national Air Defenses) and through diplomacy, which is used to avoid direct confrontation (and still better, to sustain normal relations) with new nuclear nations.³⁷

Instead, Moscow regards vertical proliferation (qualitative improvement) rather than horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons to new states with greater alarm than does the United States. Russia's posture thus reverses America's that takes greater alarm at horizontal proliferation.³⁸

Russia does not profess undue alarm at this trend. Unlike America it advances no claim to be a global "policeman," does not deploy armed forces abroad (except in some post-Soviet states), and does not employ its forces in serious combat operations. Instead, its greatly reduced conventional power capabilities, coupled with its expansive geopolitical ambitions, are leading it to become a major exporter of sensitive nuclear technologies as it seeks to reduce U.S. influence in world politics.³⁹ It avoids challenging other countries, including actual or potential nuclear and missile-capable regimes. Due to Russia's vulnerability and lack of reliable security protection and commitments from other nations, its nonproliferation stance is much more cautious and flexible than that of the United States. Indeed, it sees the DPRK and Iran as potential partners, not enemies, and therefore will not categorically oppose their programs, as does Washington.

Given Russia's post-Cold War weakness, it has been forced to confront other security threats that are incomparably more urgent to it than proliferation. These threats, as listed by Arbatov, comprise:

- The instability and bloody conflicts across the post-Soviet space and in the North Caucasus of Russia proper (which has a 1,000 km common border with the volatile South Caucasus).
- NATO's continuous extension to the east against strong Russian objections.
- Continuing stagnation of Russian armed forces and defense industries and Russia's growing conventional and nuclear inferiority to the United States and NATO.
- The threat of expanding Muslim radicalism in Central Asia (7,000 km of common border with Russia).
- The scary growth of China's economic and military power (5,000 km of common border with Russia).
- The U.S. plans to deploy missile defenses in Eastern Europe. 40

Arbatov further observes that Russia's elite broadly believes that it should not emphasize U.S. concerns over Russian ones especially, as they believe, Washington refuses to understand or accept Russia's situation and interests.41

THE SUMMIT'S ENERGY, MILITARY, AND SECURITY DIMENSIONS

Closer examination of the August 2011 summit simultaneously reveals both less and more than meets the eye. First, Russian officials admit that no pipeline is possible without strong guarantees from the North and South, neither of which has materialized although Seoul agreed in principle to a gas pipeline from Russia in 2008 and clearly prioritizes the search for reliable energy sources. 42 Second, neither Washington nor Seoul evidently think much of this deal, except for Seoul's enthusiasm about the energy pipeline. Third, Kim actually agreed to nothing tangible. As a South Korean observer noted, if he was serious about this moratorium he would have addressed himself to Washington, not Moscow.⁴³ Fourth, resuming the talks without preconditions directly clashes with continuing ROK, Japan, and U.S. insistence on tangible denuclearization as a precondition for reopening the talks. Meanwhile nuclearization proceeds. Fifth, Russia's agreement to provide this pipeline directly violates UN resolutions on sanctions to which it agreed and underscores Russia's delusion that North Korea can be induced to renounce nuclear weapons by rewarding it despite its long record of duplicity.⁴⁴

Finally, agreeing to establish a commission to investigate setting up the pipeline commits nobody to anything except exploratory discussions that can easily be slowed or terminated whenever it suits any of the parties. Thus, Moscow is pressing Seoul to accelerate negotiations over the pipeline and the accompanying price of its gas because the new DPRK government confirms its intent to realize this project.⁴⁵ Since constructing any multinational gas pipeline resembles negotiating a marriage, doing so under conditions as unpropitious as those currently on the Korean peninsula will inevitably be a long, slow affair. Moreover, although North Korea needs the revenues that the pipeline will generate, it will not rush to finalize an agreement lest others

think it is more desperate than it really is for those revenues. Doing so contradicts virtually everything we know about Pyongyang's negotiating tactics. Russia is the most eager advocate of this pipeline because it believes that only such energy initiatives strengthen its flagging Asian position. 46 Authorities believe that such largescale energy initiatives are an essential precondition for returning to Northeast Asia as an independent great power and for assisting the Korean peace process. 47 Moscow has already agreed to assume responsibility for providing South Korea gas should North Korea block transmission and will sell it at 30% below market price, although it has not specified how it will make up any shortfall.⁴⁸

Other factors also justify caution regarding rapid realization of this project. Moscow may believe or at least profess that its pledge suffices to gain South Korean support and financing, but this critical issue requires more than a pledge to be credible. Moscow can only attain the great Asian power status it craves through leveraging its energy exports in Northeast Asia and building the kind of trade and infrastructural facilities contemplated in these agreements, i.e. the pipeline and the railway. However, the railway and gas pipeline also epitomize the hidden tensions and rivalry in Russian and ROK relations with China. It remains unclear who will pay for these enormous projects. Neither Seoul nor Moscow can meet these objectives today and it is unclear who will subsidize Moscow's objectives with his own resources. Samuel Kim wrote in 2004 that,

Perhaps the most revealing part of the DPRK-Russia Moscow Declaration of 4 August 2001 is embodied in Point Five: "In order to carry out a series of bilateral plans, the Russian side confirmed its intention to use the method of *drawing financial resources* from outsiders, on the basis of understanding of the Korean side." In other words, Moscow and Pyongyang are now looking to Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo to foot the bill.⁴⁹

Not only does Russia dream about building this Euro-Asian trade network, South Korea has previously expressed such ideas and by locating this railway's terminus and gas pipeline at home, it gains greater security about its energy supplies, shelters them and its overland trade from China's influence, and moves to realize its earlier dream of becoming a Northeast Asian hub. 50 China too dreams of becoming such a hub through transcontinental trade projects, which bypass Russia. The railway and gas pipeline illustrate the ongoing Sino-Russian rivalry for leverage in the Korean peninsula, whose exploitation is a long-standing Kim family recipe. By doing so, it has added incentive to obstruct resolution of any issues until it gets its maximum price, whatever that is.

Despite Russia's plans for an overland freight service along the Trans-Siberian railway from China to Europe, China has no plans to cooperate on a Far East highspeed railway.⁵¹ Instead, it has launched a global offensive to build low-cost highspeed railways, to undercut Japanese and potential Russian competitors. Chinese officials openly say that due to these investments Chinese products will spread further, the image of Chinese brands will improve, and the result will be to "heighten China's political influence in the importing countries."52 No wonder officials like Xi Jinping maintain that Russia is a vital market for China's "going global" business strategy.⁵³

Perhaps Moscow's understanding of the consequences of China's growing commercial and economic power throughout Northeast Asia explains why a recent article in International Affairs stated openly that the economic development of other countries in the Asia-Pacific region actually threatens Russia because it generates unbridled geopolitical competition of influence.⁵⁴ Since leaders expressly link development of the RFE to Russia's capacity to play a "system-forming" role in Asia, failure to develop the area through such major energy, transportation, and trade projects consigns it to being linked to China's regional development plan and contributes to the failure of Russia's "Ostpolitik," a failure having profound strategic implications. Despite Russia's professed identity of interests with China, Medvedev's policy of enhancing Russia's Asian profile does not entail yielding to China in Korea. Therefore, the gas pipeline expresses Northeast Asian rivalries and competing political agendas. It allows Russia to pose as a great Asian power and enhances its standing in the Six-Party Talks because it gains an apparent mechanism through which to influence both Koreas. Otherwise, Russia possesses no way of leveraging tensions in Korea that it openly viewed as perhaps even more dangerous than Iran's proliferation as a threat to international security even before the crises of 2010.⁵⁵

Russia also still envisions engaging South Korea in large-scale transportation, energy, and infrastructure projects in the RFE to forestall a Chinese economic bloc in Northeast Asia and enhance Russia as an intercontinental transportation and trade hub between Europe and Asia.⁵⁶ It is now pushing deals also involving LNG exports to South Korea.⁵⁷ North Korea's unresolved situation and the inability of Russia and China to negotiate an alternative pipeline route through China to the ROK have obstructed meaningful progress on this deal.⁵⁸ Yet Seoul is considering alternatives, e.g. cooperation with Japan to procure LNG, either by joint ownership of a Russian field or cooperating regarding North American shale gas.⁵⁹ It is also intensively working to increase exports from Central Asia.⁶⁰

A breakthrough in this pipeline reduces China's leverage on Russian energy exports. Hitherto any gas pipeline from Russia to the ROK would, absent Pyongyang's assent, have to traverse China, which vetoed any alternatives through Mongolia. Moreover, China and Russia are embroiled in difficult negotiations over a Russian gas pipeline to China. China demands a below market price. Since China has alternatives, Russia had to offer it a concessionary price of \$250/tcm. But a pipeline to South Korea through the DPRK bypasses China, reduces its leverage on Russia, which would be able to supply gas to all of Asia, and allows Russia to insist upon a higher price to China. Indeed, Moscow recently announced that it would not lower its price for gas through the projected pipeline to China even as it offers South Korea a 30% discount. 61 Also, it gains more access to North Korea (one byproduct of the summit is that a Russian intelligence officer will mentor Kim Jong-un, on world affairs).

For North Korea, this defense cooperation revives, at least to some degree, an earlier military relationship. Kim Jong-il visibly sought a military and negotiating partner or supporter/s in the Six-Party Talks. In 2011 China refused to offer military assistance, and imposed resuming the Six-Party Talks unconditionally as its condition of new economic assistance. Meanwhile China's influence upon North Korea's economy has steadily grown. North Korean officials clearly resent this dependence on China that contradicts the autarchic Juche (self-reliance) ideology even though they need Chinese assistance and support for the succession to Kim.⁶³ Indeed, we should never forget that nuclearization also aims to emancipate North Korea from China's tutelage upon its foreign and defense policies. That desire to escape China's pressure also underlies Pyongyang's frequent, if ham-handed, efforts at rapprochement with Washington. Kim apparently had no choice but to accept China's conditions, but he invoked Pyongyang's long-standing tradition of playing off Russia and China as rivals for influence. And when China announced that it was strengthening military cooperation with North Korea in November 2011 this probably was prompted by Pyongyang's August agreements with Moscow.⁶⁴ This outcome also validated Kim's insight about the ongoing Russo-Chinese rivalry over North Korea.

Pyongyang benefits by expanding ties with Moscow since that induces Beijing not just to be more obliging on military aid but also to relax its linkage between trying to get North Korea to talk seriously with South Korea and providing aid. For example, the DPRK denounced Lee Myung-bak and his "gang of traitors," right after Kim returned from his Beijing summit in May 2011 and announced that the DPRK would wait out the remainder of his term.⁶⁵ This suggests that Pyongyang believes that, "Maintenance of a tense inter-Korean relationship can be a way for North Korea to underscore dissatisfaction with China for failure to fully meet North Korean economic demands and expectation."66 Another way to react to disappointment with China is to upgrade ties with Russia.

While Russia clearly covets the status of a major actor on the Korean peninsula, it will do nothing that could potentially destabilize the area lest conflict break out. Therefore, it too would not give North Korea major military assistance. Moreover, North Korea's precarious economic situation means that Moscow would probably be left holding the economic bag for all expenses and costs incurred in doing so. Therefore the limited nature of cooperation restricted to search and rescue operations and the summit's economic agreements, represent, to some degree, a surrogate for the defense agreements that Kim wanted. Nonetheless, for Russia such accords are important because they give it a channel by which it can now talk to the North Korean military, clearly the strongest political bloc or faction in the DPRK. That dialogue could become vital in North Korea's succession and be a means by which Moscow can attempt to restrain what it deems as potentially provocative actiwons.

Russia knows that DPRK provocations in 2010 not only fostered tighter U.S.-ROK alliance mechanisms, but also triggered South Korea's visible upgrading of defense capability and intolerant stance toward future DPRK provocations. Gaining any leverage over DPRK defense policies without committing Moscow to support those provocations and giving North Korea something to lose if it does act provocatively makes sense under the circumstances.

More recently, North Korea and the United States concluded an agreement wherein North Korea agreed to suspend uranium enrichment, nuclear, and missile tests and allow IAEA inspectors to visit its main nuclear facility in return for 240,000 tons of nutritional supplements. Moscow welcomed the agreement, adding that it now believed the Six-Party Talks would soon be resumed.⁶⁷ Some Russian experts further commented that Russia should exploit the situation after the "Leap Day" accord not just to facilitate resumption of the talks, but also to attempt to reconcile North and South Korean negotiating positions. 68

Also of potential interest regarding the Korean question is the fact that on March 1 Putin, shortly before being elected president again, stated that he hopes to resolve the territorial dispute with Japan over the Kurile Islands and have the negotiators start at the beginning and work their way through to resolution of the issue. These remarks were welcomed by Tokyo and lent further credence to the idea that Russia was seeking a diplomatic rapprochement with Japan.⁶⁹ Yet, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately responded by saying that the Kurile Islands' status was not negotiable, a statement that leaves a question mark over Putin's initiative and implicitly over Russia's Asian policy in general. 70 Worse yet, soon after the "Leap Day" accord, North Korea announced its intention to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birthday on April 12 by launching a space satellite, an action that would clearly violate UNSC resolutions concerning North Korean testing of missile capabilities and was promptly called a "deal breaker" by Washington. 71 As of this writing, the future of the February 29 accord and Putin's initiative towards Japan are uncertain, but both resolution of the Korean issue and the Russian effort to make its voice as an independent great power heard in Asia face serious obstacles. For the moment North Korea can pocket Moscow's gifts and Moscow can delude itself that it is now a great Asian power, but nuclearization continues, the Six-Party Talks remain moribund, and even if they start there will probably not be much to discuss. This may conform to preconceptions of Russian interests, but it is hard to see how anyone benefits from perpetuating the regional stalemate and playing into China's hands.

So it is not surprising that Moscow has again urged Pyongyang to mothball its uranium enrichment program,72 but it will be surprising if Pyongyang heeds Moscow's call or agrees to conditions for resuming the talks. After all, what can Moscow do to it? It appears to North Korea that, "the northern triangle of Russia, China, and North Korea has come back to life,"73 reviving the division in Northeast Asia between sea and land powers.74

The coincidence of strategic interests among these three states is once again binding them together, even though they are not free from intermittent bickering over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile adventures. Even though Pyongyang's anachronistic behaviors from time to time baffle Beijing and Moscow, the geostrategic considerations basically drive the two giant neighbors' policy towards Pyongyang. 75

[Author's note: The views expressed here do not represent those of the U.S. Army, Defense Department, or the U.S. Government.]

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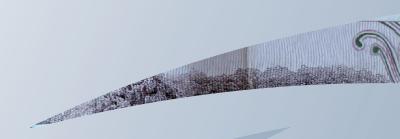
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