Restitching the Triangle? North Korean Relations with China and Russia After Ukraine

By Andrei Lankov

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 heralded the dawn of a new era – not so much for Russia, but for the entire world. Or, perhaps it was the outbreak of the new Sino-U.S. conflict which should be seen as the major turning point? At any rate, the post-1991 certainties which only a few years ago seemed nearly eternal, are gone. Globalization is in retreat, and hope for what Ferguson and Schularick once described as "Chimerica" has disappeared, too.[1] For the near future, we are likely to live in a world of rival blocs where even the taboo on territorial acquisitions through conquest is seemingly broken. However, North Korea is one of a handful of countries which clearly benefited from the ongoing change.

Background: From the Dawn of the Cold War to the Rise of Donald Trump

The North Korean state emerged as a Soviet experiment in social engineering: it was designed by the Soviets as a "people's democracy," whose expected destiny was to remain dependent on and controlled by the USSR. The Chinese decision to dispatch a large expeditionary force to Korea in 1950 led to the increase of Beijing's influence over Pyongyang. Thus, a triangle de-facto alliance was born, with the USSR acting as the senior partner, China being second in command, and North Korea being a subordinate.

However, this triangle was unstable and existed for less than a decade. Chinese leaders were not happy about their subordinate position toward the Soviet Union, while in North Korea Kim Il-sung harbored a grudge about its dependency on both patron states. Around 1960 this configuration was torn apart by the Sino-Soviet schism. The schism not only killed the USSR-China alliance, but allowed North Korea to position itself between Moscow and Beijing, using their contradictions to advance its own interests.

On the whole, North Korea's equidistance policy of 1960-90 worked well – at least, for the North Korean elite. North Korea was liked by neither Beijing nor Moscow, but its diplomats found ways to extract aid from both sponsor states,

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Dr. Andrei Lankov is a historian and professor of Korean Studies at Kookmin University in Seoul, South Korea and a Director at NK News. The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization they are affiliated with.

giving little in return. At the same time, Kim Il-sung and his people were extremely wary of any attempts by the USSR or China to interfere in North Korean domestic politics and ruthlessly purged officials suspected of excessively close relations with China or the USSR.[2]

After the collapse of the communist bloc, in the early 1990s, both Beijing and Moscow were sure the days of the Kim family regime were numbered, hence it should be left to its own fate. Aid was reduced (by China) or discontinued (by Russia), and relations with Pyongyang were nearly frozen. Tellingly, however, China continued to provide North Korea with food aid even when the two counties' relations hit a nadir – a useful reminder that stability in the region is one of China's constant priorities. According to the WFP database, from 1996 to 2010 China was the second largest provider of food aid to North Korea: it shipped a cumulative 3.0 million metric tons, slightly less than South Korea and much more than other major donors.[3]

This period of relative neglect lasted until the late 1990s when it began to dawn on decision-makers that North Korea, contrary to the earlier predictions, was likely to survive for a long time. This prompted a gradual revival of the relations between North Korea and its two giant neighbors.

In regard to China, the revival of trade was most prominent. Throughout the 2000-2015 period, the volume of the official trade between the two countries increased nearly 14-fold, from $0.5 billion to $6.9 billion. In 2000 China controlled 20.4% of North Korea's foreign trade volume. In 2015 the figure increased to an impressive 69.0%.[4] The economies of the two countries were quite complementary: North Korea's export to China was first dominated by seafood, but soon coal and other minerals became North Korea's major export product.[5] The Chinese exports to North Korea were dominated by consumer goods – the sale of food and fuel was largely subsidized and hence, being counted as "aid," was not represented in the official statistics.

There was an improvement in political relations as well. In 2000, after a long break, Kim Jong-il visited China. From then until 2022, Kim Jong-il and his successor Kim Jong-un met the top Chinese leaders 14 times.[6] It reflected the new position of China: leaders realized that North Korea is not going away, so it could not be ignored any more.

The Chinese policy toward the Korean Peninsula throughout the 2000-2020 period is best characterized by the well-known "three no's" formula: "No war, No instability, No nukes" (buzhan, buluan, wuhe).[7] The order is important: denuclearization, while present in this wish list, was merely a third objective

(a distant third, one would say). Far more important, the central Chinese goal in the region was to maintain the status quo – nicely described as "peace and stability maintenance." Christopher Twomey aptly observed in 2008: "Beijing has wielded a number of coercive tools aimed a North Korea, while avoiding excesses that might lead to [downward] spirals on the peninsula or regionally."[8] As Glaser and Yun Sun correctly observed in 2015, "Beijing strongly opposes Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions […], but it only supports strategies of denuclearization that do not threaten peace and stability on the Peninsula."[9]

In practice, however, such a stance meant that China would be reluctant to do anything meaningful to curtail Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions – such drastic measures would be wrought with a danger of starting Twomey's "spirals".

Obviously, instability included two possible scenarios: an implosion of the Kim family regime and the absorption of the North by the triumphant South, likely as a result of such an implosion. Presumably, the former was a greater concern. It is partially confirmed by the willingness of well-connected Chinese scholars in 2008-2010 to talk about conditions Beijing would accept for a South-driven unification of the peninsula. For example, in 2009 Shi Yinhong wrote: "China's expectations are likely confined to a few non-negotiables: the peninsula must not threaten China's security through internal disruption or chaos; it must not function as a strategic fortress for U.S. ''containment'' against China; and it must not damage China's territorial and national integration by any irredentist and ''pan-Korean'' aspirations driven by extreme nationalism."[10] Similar views were then often expressed by the Chinese scholar-officials in private talks.

Russia's policy towards North Korea underwent a similar transformation – almost simultaneously. For Russia, the turning point was Vladimir Putin's visit to North Korea in July 2000 when he stopped over at Pyongyang on his way to the G-8 summit in Okinawa – the first head of the Soviet/Russian state to ever set foot in Pyongyang. In 2000-2019 period Putin and his alter-ego Medvedev met Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un five times.[11]

In Russia, the resurgence of interest in North Korea also reflected some changes in public opinion. In the late 1990s, the hitherto positive attitude towards the West in Russia was changing for the worse. For Western observers, this change is often embodied by Vladimir Putin, but there are reasons to believe that the strongman was more a sign than the reason for this transformation. In the new atmosphere, North Korea was increasingly seen not as a Stalinist "living fossil," but as a brave David, challenging the American Goliath. Still, at the first approximation, Russia's goals did not differ much from

the Chinese "no war, no instability, no nukes" formula, with nukes being a distant third. The difference, if any, was in the strategic value attached to Korea: for Russia, it was far less valuable than for China.

At the same time, in spite of ostensibly warmer relations, the Russian government has remained reluctant to spend money on assisting North Korea. Tellingly, throughout the 1996-2010 period, Russian food aid equaled a paltry 51 thousand metric tons – about 1/60th of the Chinese level.[12]

The talks about economic interaction intensified in 2014, when deteriorating relations with the West prompted Putin's government to consider re-orientation towards Asia. Russia's trade with North Korea declined dramatically in the early 1990s and in the early 2000s stabilized at the $100-150 million level, well below North Korea's trade with China.[13] In 2014 a Russian minister said that Russian trade with North Korea would increase tenfold by 2020, reaching the $1 billion mark.[14] As many observers predicted, this much publicized statement was a pipe dream: instead of growing, the trade volume continued to shrink even before the outbreak of a nuclear crisis in 2017 which made the trade with North Korea almost impossible. In 2014, the trade volume was $92.2 million; in 2016 it went down to $78.9 million and in 2018 it was merely $34.1 million.[15]

The reasons for failure are structural in nature. The Russian and Korean economies are not complementary: Russian companies have little if any interest in nearly all the major items for which North Korea has a competitive advantage in the world market: minerals (especially coal), seafood, and textiles. The only exception is labor: the Russian government and Russian businesses would welcome North Korean workers – cheap, obedient, and hard-working. By and large, trade between Russia and Korea is possible only when it is backed by subsidies that the Russian government is willing to provide due to some extra-economic, strategic reasons – as was the case in the Cold War days.

The New Era: China

The late 2010s and early 2020s put an end to the post-Cold War era. When it comes to North Korea, three events are of the greatest significance: the "Trump shock," the Sino-U.S. conflict, and, finally, the Ukrainian war. All these events heralded globalization's retreat, and it was much felt in Northeast Asia where, to quote Daniel Sneider, it "has reinvigorated the Cold War architecture."[16] Indeed, it seems that we are sliding back to the confrontation of two hostile blocks, similar to what one could observe for a few years in the 1950s: the Moscow-Beijing-Pyongyang bloc vs. the Washington-Tokyo-Seoul bloc. However, the hierarchy of the new alliance, as well as its underlying logic, are very different from the 1950s.

This dramatic and, presumably, long-term rift followed a short period of intense cooperation between would-be opponents. This short-lived period of cooperation between Beijing, Moscow and Washington was provoked by the actions of Donald Trump whose 2017 bellicose rhetoric ("fire and fury," "bloody nose," and other tweets) caused much anxiety in Moscow and Beijing. Many observers were afraid that the crisis would escalate with the U.S. delivering a preemptive strike against North Korea's nuclear facilities. As the International Crisis Group report, released in January 2018, said: "The threat of a war on the Korean peninsula is higher than at any time in recent history."[17]

This looming threat of war caused Russian and Chinese diplomats to side with the U.S. at the UNSC in 2016-2017. They approved the new harsh UN sanctions regime, suggested by the U.S. side. China and Russia obviously believed that such concessions would appease Trump who, presumably, could be persuaded to wait for the sanctions' results instead of ordering a pre-emptive strike. For China, such a show of solidarity with the U.S. also might have been seen as a way to postpone the looming confrontation with Washington. Russia, in turn, was ready to follow the then Chinese line – Moscow's decision to support sanctions on the use of North Korean labor is a good example of such willingness to do that.[18] It also helped that North Korea's nuclear adventurism was not seen in Moscow and Beijing favorably: like the other five "legal" nuclear states, Russia and China had no reason to welcome nuclear proliferation. Thus, a sort of joint Russia-China-U.S. position on the North Korean issue emerged for a brief while.

However, this unity proved to be short-lived. The U.S.-China "trade war" began in the spring of 2018 and soon developed into a comprehensive confrontation between the world's first and second economic powers, likely to last for a long time. The outbreak of the Ukrainian war delivered the second blow. It largely freed North Korea of its longstanding status as a bizarre and eccentric "rogue state," transforming it into a useful "my enemy's enemy" not only for China but also for Russia (even though some dislike and mistrust, arguably, stayed).

China's attitude towards North Korea, expressed by the "no war, no instability, no nukes" formula, remains ambivalent. On the one hand, China might be irritated by many actions of Pyongyang, which for a long time has been perceived by Beijing as a capricious, unpredictable, and ungrateful semi-ally. Like other nuclear powers, China is unhappy with North Korea's nuclear program, which indirectly threatens China's military and strategic superiority. Furthermore, this program as well as frequent North Korean provocations create reasons or excuses to maintain or even increase the American presence in Northeast Asia. At the same time, China needs North Korea to stay afloat,

and this goal, always important, became tantamount after 2020, when China's relations with the U.S. moved towards a Cold War, while chances of North Korea's denuclearization had withered away.

There are valid reasons why China is afraid of a North Korea's crisis. A serious internal crisis in North Korea, if left uncontrolled, is likely to lead to the disintegration of the Kim family regime and the subsequent unification of the country on Seoul's terms. The result would be the emergence of a single Korean state, likely to be both democratic and nationalistic. This combination would exercise an unwelcome influence on China's internal situation – especially on the ethnic Korean minority. A united Korea, being essentially an enlarged version of the present-day ROK, is also likely to remain a U.S. ally. This means that the U.S. troops, listening stations and air bases would move much closer to the Chinese border and Beijing itself.[19] Zhu Feng and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga observed in 2015: "The most important security concern driving China's policy remains China's view of North Korea as a comprehensive strategic buffer."[20] Indeed, this was China's major concern for centuries, and a reason behind China's decision to send troops to Korea in 1950 (as well as in 1592 and 1884). The recent developments made this concern even more important.

This age-old buffer zone logic is nicely expressed by an oft-repeated adage which compares North Korea and China with lips and teeth. This remark, first made by Mao Zedong himself, is often misinterpreted by Westerners as a reference to China and North Korea's special closeness, while, in reality, the implied message is more complicated. The adage is a reference to a story (well known to all educated Chinese) of the State of Yu and the State of Guo, of the Warring States period, with the State of Guo serving as a buffer zone for the State of Yu. The full expression, allegedly a quote from a wise adviser's remonstrance, says: "If the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold,"[21] and it was meant to remind the sovereign about the importance of keeping buffer zone states in good shape.

Until the crisis in its relations with the U.S., Beijing was prepared to consider some compromises. For example, Chinese scholars in the 2000s and early 2010s frequently suggested that the U.S. should promise not to deploy any military assets north of the present-day DMZ if Korea is unified under Seoul's auspices. There were also periods when China's attitude to North Korea was turning for the worse. For example, in 2013 the resumption of nuclear tests and the execution of Jang Song-taek, Kim Jong-un's uncle with close ties to Beijing, triggered a significant, if short-lasting, cooling in the bilateral relationship.[22]

However, nowadays the Sino-American Cold War makes a U.S.-China compromise highly unlikely, essentially impossible. Chinese decision-makers have no doubt that their major and overwhelming goal is to keep North Korea afloat – even though many of Pyongyang actions continue to annoy China.

Western and American experts sometimes express hope that American diplomatic efforts might somehow succeed in persuading China to withdraw its support for North Korea – after all, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, the main concern for the U.S., also disturb and indirectly threaten China. These hopes are completely unfounded. One cannot help but agree with Doug Bandow: "it is unlikely that China could do so even if it wanted to, and it probably doesn't want to."[23]

There is no mutual love between Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping – on the contrary, both leaders see each other with sufficient mistrust and worse.[34] However, political decisions are based not on personal chemistry, but on group and state interests, and the long-term preservation of the North Korean state serves China's national interests best. From the point of view of China, the harm caused by the North Korean nuclear program is real but less painful than the harm likely to be caused by the possible disintegration of the North Korean regime. Therefore, China has made a choice of the lesser evil and grudgingly accepts the necessity of living with a nuclear North Korea. In order to convince China to abandon the North, the West needs to offer Beijing very serious compensation, whose cost is likely to be prohibitive (a Taiwan-North Korea swap, perhaps?).

Around 2018, China made an important strategic decision to maintain North Korea, keeping it afloat through the provision of modest but sufficient aid. Actually, it was a development of its post-2000 policy, but with the beginning of the U.S.-China confrontation, the need to maintain North Korean became tantamount. This aid, likely, consists of three vital items: food, fuel and fertilizer. There are occasional reports about the arrival of this aid, but no detailed information is available in the open sources.[35]

Nonetheless, indirect evidence indicates that such aid is significant. The major indicator is the stability of prices of the relevant items in North Korean markets. Korea does not produce oil and for decades its harvest has been insufficient to meet even the basic nutritional needs of its population. Thus, the fact that prices of grain and fuel as well as the exchange rate of foreign currencies remained stable throughout the turbulent 2020-2023 period should be seen as an indirect but reliable sign of Chinese aid flowing into North Korea. According to Asia Press data, the rice retail prices in February 2020 were 5,670 NKW (per kilo) while in February 2023 it was a bit lower, 5,600 NKW. The USD/NKW exchange rate also slightly went down from 8,832 NKW to 8,100 NKW and the price of gasoline

increased slightly, from 11,340 NKW in February 2020 to 14,800 NKW in February 2023.[26] Given the near absence of regular foreign trade, and the well-known insufficiency of the domestic supply, these figures seem to be a good indicator of the continuous and significant Chinese aid infusion.

China faces substantial obstacles in dealing with North Korea, and these obstacles are partially of its own making, being consequences of the 2016-17 UNSC resolutions once supported by the Chinese diplomats. The UNSC sanctions remain a noticeable hindrance to the development of economic interactions between North Korea and China (as well as Russia). There is little doubt that Chinese (and, to a lesser extent, Russian) companies have been deliberately violating the UNSC sanctions' regime, often with the full knowledge of the authorities. Predictably, the Chinese diplomats deny – and will keep denying – the very fact that violations have taken place, with hardly anybody taking these denials at the face value.[27] Nonetheless, Beijing still has to reckon with the existing restrictions: the existence of the UNSC restrictions means that the scale of violations should remain sufficiently modest.

In other words, the Chinese side can safely supply oil products to North Korea, using the Dandong-Shinuiju pipeline, whose operation is difficult to control. Beijing also can close its eyes to ship-to-ship transfers arranged by private companies. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that China will make significant investments in North Korean industry and mining as long as the current sanctions regime remains operational. If Chinese-owned mines or larger factories emerge in North Korea, this will be too obvious a sanctions regime violation, which even Chinese diplomats will find difficult to deny. Most likely, China will not go that far – it will damage its claim to be a staunch supporter of multilateralism as well as a responsible international player. The reputational damage from such a blatant violation is likely to exceed the rather limited economic gains the Chinese side will get from industrial and mining developments in North Korea. This means that, as long as the UNSC sanctions regime persists, China will be unable and/or unwilling to provide North Korea with assistance on a scale which would make sustainable growth possible.

Given that the removal of the sanctions appears unlikely, in the foreseeable future China will keep North Korea afloat, but will not invest much. Apart from the UNSC decisions, there are other reasons for China to be cautious: North Korea's rapid economic development, should it happen, would not necessarily serve China's long-term interests. As experience has shown, whenever the North Korean leadership believe that their economic position is stable, they aim at maximizing independence and begin to act with complete neglect of

their allies' interests. Most likely, China will limit itself to maintaining the status quo, and it means that Beijing will deal with a dual task: to prevent North Korea's collapse (and its absorption by the South) while also keeping Pyongyang sufficiently dependent on Chinese aid.

The New Era: Russia

The beginning of the Sino-U.S. conflict was great news for Pyongyang. However, soon afterwards the North Korean leaders got another reason to feel more confident about their future: Russia invaded Ukraine. The Ukrainian conflict provided Pyongyang with the gift of another ally, albeit less useful than China. Significantly, it also contributed toward the changes in the world North Korean leaders see as desirable – the seeming retreat of the U.S.-led globalizing world serves their interests perfectly.

Once the war began, North Korean diplomacy began to support the Russian position on Ukraine with remarkable intensity. In early March, soon after the Russian invasion began, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution which condemned the invasion and demanded that Russia "immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders." Out of 193 UN Member States, 35 abstained and merely five, including Russia itself, voted against this resolution. The four other countries which voted against this resolution included Belarus and Syria (both heavily dependent on Russia), Eritrea and North Korea.[28]

The voting pattern predictably continued. For example, on October 12, 2022 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling on member countries not to recognize the four regions of Ukraine that Russia has claimed. Out of 193 UN Member States, 35 abstained and five voted against it – including, of course, Russia. The four other dissenters included this time Belarus, Syria, Nicaragua and North Korea.[29] Since the invasion, the North Korean representative at the UN always voted against resolutions which condemned Russia's actions (and the number of countries which did so was always very small).[30] Interestingly enough, North Korea voted against allowing Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to deliver a video address to the UN General Assembly in September 2022. Apart from Russia and North Korea, five other states voted against the Ukrainian President's voice being heard: Belarus, Cuba, Nicaragua, Eritrea, Syria.[31]

Finally, the DPRK became one of a handful of states which officially recognized as independent states the two self-proclaimed republics the pro-Russian forces established in East Ukraine.[32] Soon, in late September 2022, these territories were annexed by Russia, and this annexation was also duly recognized by the DPRK government.[33]

The North Korean diplomatic efforts were reciprocated. On May 26, the UN Security Council met to discuss the then recent resumption of ICBM tests in North Korea. However, the resolution condemning the North Korean actions was blocked by the Russians and Chinese.[34] Needless to say, the Beijing and Moscow functionaries claimed that it was the United States who was responsible for the North Korean nuclear and missile ambitions. Most likely, this is what we are going to hear in the foreseeable future every time some resolutions critical of North Korea are introduced to the UN Security Council.

In the first few months of the Ukrainian conflict, the North Korean media remained silent on the war in Eastern Europe. This agrees well with the current North Korean policy on reporting overseas news. Since early 2020, the North Korean media dramatically reduced overseas news coverage (and began to give preference to the randomly chosen reports about disasters of all kinds happening around the globe). Thus, North Korean initial silence agreed with the current information policy pattern.

However, in February 2023 North Korean leaders departed from their earlier position. On January 27, Kim Yo-jong, the sister of Kim Jong-un and de-facto spokesperson of the North Korean government, delivered a bombastic statement, where she expressed full support for Russia's invasion. Having said, that the "world would be brighter, safer and calmer now, if it were not for the U.S.," she condemned shipping of Western military aid to Ukraine. Kim Yo-jong said: "We will always stand in the same trench with the service personnel and people of Russia who have turned out in the struggle to defend the dignity and honor of the state and the sovereignty and security of the country." This sounds strong and, indeed, can be seen as an unusually strong expression of solidarity by the current North Korean standards. Nonetheless, one should not overlook that Kim Yo-jong's statement is, essentially, as symbolical as it is bombastic.[35]

However, the UN voting and statements are not the only area where cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang is possible. In late 2022 and early 2023, there were numerous reports about the shipment of artillery ammunition and light arms from North Korea to Russia. The first such report was made by the New York Times in early September 2022.[36] Soon afterwards, the U.S. government agencies made statements which confirmed that, according to the U.S. intelligence, some talks between Russia and North Korea on shipments took place, even though they were deliberately imprecise about details. On November 2, the White House's national security spokesman repeated the claims about the North Korean shipment of the artillery shells.[37] Then, in December, it was again officially stated by the White House that the ammunition and, perhaps, some light arms (like grenade launchers) were going to be delivered not to the regular army, but to the Wagner Group paramilitaries.[38]

The claims were officially denied by both the Russian and North Korean sides a number of times,[39] but such denials should be expected: the purchase of the arms from North Korea would constitute a blatant violation of the UN sanctions regime. Finally, on January 20, 2023, the White House claimed that the shipment has left North Korea. In an unusual twist, the U.S. side even published some satellite photos which depicted five railway carriages (allegedly with ammunition) which left the North Korean border railway station.[40]

For the time being, the U.S. claims look plausible, even though it seems that shipments are of small scale. Indeed, even keeping in mind the hyper-militarization of the North Korean economy, it is difficult to expect that these shipments will seriously change the balance of power on the frontlines – even though these shipments, if real, can help North Korea to get some currency, since the Russian government, awash in money but short of ammunition, is going to pay well. At the same time, compared with China, Russia has less stake in maintaining the image of a responsible member of the international community. So, it can politically afford to openly challenge the UNSC resolutions – something China is likely to avoid, as argued above.

However, this willingness will hardly translate into Russian investment to North Korea. Even in a better environment, the only investments considered were the pipeline and railway constructions – two projects whose goal was to connect Russian and South Korean markets, with North Korea being used only as a space to be traversed. The Russian companies lack experience operating in North Korea, and have little interest in doing business there. The investments could only be made possible by government guarantees, which are unlikely.

Labor exports are another field where cooperation between the Russian Federation and North Korea is possible. In 2017 Russian diplomats supported the UNSC resolution 2375, which banned the employment of North Korean workers in the UN member states. At the time, there were well over 30,000 North Korean workers employed in Russia (largely in construction),[41] with the unbroken history of Russia's labor imports from Korea going back some 75 years.[42]

Once the Russian troops advanced into Eastern Ukraine and North Korea formally recognized the self-proclaimed Donbass states, Alexander Matsegora, the Russian ambassador in Pyongyang, gave an interview to Izvestia daily where he explicitly said that North Korean construction workers would be employed at the reconstruction work in Eastern Ukraine.[43] Obviously, it was not his initiative: around the same time, the possible employment of North Korean workers was mentioned by another high-ranking Russian official, Marat Khusnullin, an influential deputy prime minister, responsible for the construction industry.[44]

It was seemingly expected that the nebulous legal standing of the breakaway regions would allow getting around the UNSC sanctions regime, since the self-proclaimed statelets were not UN members and hence could ignore sanctions with impunity. Obviously, Vladimir Putin's hasty decision to annex the regions changed the situation, depriving the labor import scheme of a convenient excuse. Nonetheless, talk about labor exports lingers.

However, if seen from Pyongyang, Russia remains a rather problematic ally. First, for Russia, the strategic value of North Korea is significantly lower than for China. Second, the Russian economy is much weaker and smaller than that of China and likely to shrink in the near future. Therefore, Russia is both less willing and less able to provide significant economic assistance to North Korea.

The above-mentioned structural incompatibility of the Russian and North Korean economies is here to stay, so Russian companies are unlikely to import North Korean goods in large quantities. An increase in the volume of trade between the two countries is possible, but only as long as it will be subsidized by the Russian government. The only possible exception is labor exports which are likely to expand: one can expect that in the near future North Korean workers will be employed in Russia in large numbers. To make the violations of the UNSC resolutions less obvious, they can be issued student or visitors' visas.

Given that Moscow is not going to subsidize its economic interactions with Pyongyang, in North Korea's relations the diplomatic dimension is likely to remain prevalent. The most valuable diplomatic commodity at Russia's disposal is the permanent seat at the Security Council. This allows Russia to easily use its veto power to block anti-North Korean resolutions. This position of Russia (and China) means that, for the foreseeable future, the UNSC will remain paralyzed on matters related to North Korea. Due to the change in Russian and Chinese positions, North Korean actions, including nuclear and ICBM tests, will hardly suffer anything but a mild verbal condemnation. Russia's diplomatic support will be provided to North Korea in other international venues as well.

Given that China is already determined to block all anti-Pyongyang moves in the UNSC, Russia's support might appear superfluous, but this is not the case. North Koreans cannot rule out that in the long run, China might change its position due to some reasons, but even in such an unfavorable situation Pyongyang will still be able to rely on a Russian veto. North Korean diplomats will reciprocate by voting for Russia whenever they are present. The actual value of such support is small, given North Korea's pariah standing and relatively small international presence. Additionally, the pro-Moscow countries are likely to remain a small minority, so the North Korean vote will hardly tip the balance.

Nevertheless, the North Korean diplomatic actions, while symbolic, will not remain unnoticed in Moscow whose leaders are eager to have a modicum of approval, both for domestic propaganda purposes and their own peace of mind.

Diplomatic interactions between Moscow and Pyongyang are curiously asymmetric. North Korea's diplomatic actions cost Pyongyang nothing, but have little if any impact on the real situation. On the other hand, Russia's willingness to block further sanctions against North Korea brings quite tangible material benefits to North Korea – or, rather, blocks significant losses Pyongyang would suffer otherwise. It renders the UN sanctions regime, whose efficiency has been grossly overestimated, completely toothless.

However, the prospects of RF-DPRK relations are less certain than those of the DPRK's relations with China. Much depends on the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as on the situation in the Russian economy and society, especially the long-term impact of the sanctions. If the sanctions do not hit Russia hard, and/or the war in Ukraine does not result in a serious Russian defeat, the current model of Russian-North Korean relations may continue for a long time.

The Impact

North Korean leaders benefited much from the recent developments. The Chinese and Russian support guarantees the security and stability of the Kim family regime for the foreseeable future. As long as the U.S.-China conflict persists, North Korea will remain incorporated into the China-led block (small and essentially consisting, apart from China itself, of Russia and a handful of other states). This will ensure that North Korea will receive aid – perhaps, not generous, but definitely sufficient to stay afloat.

This is reminiscent of 1953-1960 situation. However, these days, China, not Russia, is the foundation of the de-facto alliance, with Moscow's role being very limited. Russia lacks both the need and the means to support North Korea on a level which would make a meaningful difference.

We already can see how such changes in the outside world influenced North Korea's domestic policy. The North Korean leadership reacted to the ongoing changes by curtailing the market-oriented economic reforms Kim Jong-un and his government carried out in 2012-2019. The new reform measures ceased to be introduced after 2017, and from around 2020, the North Korean press extolls the glories of the centrally planned economy. The authorities seemingly hope

for a return to the days of Kim Il-sung, when, in the 1960s and 1970s, North Korea had an extreme variety of the Leninist economy.[45] This model is inefficient, and North Korean leaders seem to be aware of this. However, under the current conditions, North Korea can afford an inefficient, completely stagnant, or even slowly shrinking. economy, since its inefficiency is largely offset by Chinese economic support. It is more important for the North Korean leaders that the Leninist economic model boosts the government's ability of surveillance and control.

Most likely, North Korea will reduce its interactions with the outside world, which in the past two decades were driven by the hope to acquire some aid and investment, even at the cost of some political risk since exchanges exposed the population to dangerous, uncensored knowledge of the outside world. In the current situation, with steady, if modest, Chinese support, such measures are not necessary any more. The foreign presence in North Korea, which was dramatically reduced with the outbreak of the pandemic, will not return to the pre-2020 level for a long time.

The new situation will also influence North Korea's nuclear program. Expectations about possible denuclearization have been a pipe dream since at least 2006, the year of the first nuclear test, even though it took a long time before this became obvious for many. However, until recently one could hope that, in exchange for sanctions' relief and other concessions, the North Korean leaders would agree to limit or downsize their nuclear and missile programs. Such a deal, a swap of some nuclear facilities for some sanctions, could be discussed in Hanoi in 2019, even though the North Korean demands and expectations were excessive, and this resulted in talks collapsing.

However, the current developments make even such imperfect compromise highly unlikely. The Chinese and Russian position ensures that sanctions cannot be tightened, while existing sanctions are likely to be violated. This deprives North Korea of any incentives to search for a compromise on its nuclear and missile program. On the contrary, Pyongyang will likely work towards improving both its ICBM force, necessary to deter and/or blackmail the U.S., and its tactical component, necessary to blackmail or subdue the South.

Thus, the dual crisis is likely to deliver a North Korea which will be more stable, more repressive, significantly more isolated, less interested in compromises and more willing and able to advance its nuclear and missile programs. Unfortunately, this is likely to be a lasting change.

Endnotes

[1] Niall Ferguson, "U.S.-China Cooperation Is Critical to Global Economic Health," Washington Post, November 17, 2008

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