

Russia's Viewpoint toward Peace Forum on the Korean Peninsula*

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The current U.S.-DPRK current contradictions in the nuclear sphere do present a genuine crisis, perhaps the most serious in Northeast Asia since the Korean war. The DPRK became the first country to announce its withdrawal from the Non-proliferation Treaty. The prospect of unconstrained nuclear weapons development creates very worrisome precedents for the global non-proliferation regime and for regional security. The United States reacts very strongly against the North Korean moves and as a result there is no assurance of a peaceful, negotiated outcome between the United States and North Korea that addresses these vexing issues.

The military option is not acceptable from the Russian point of view. Why?

a) North Korea is not perceived as a direct threat to Russia. The DPRK was created and groomed by the USSR. Moscow did not like North Korean leaders much, but always looked at Pyongyang as a poor, weak and frightened regime. You can hardly find anybody in present-day Russia who would seriously share the view that North Korea may one day attack Russia with missiles or by any other method. Feelings on the account of Pyongyang's potential aggressiveness are quite different in South Korea, Japan and even (despite the geographical factor) in the USA.

Both military-political leadership and ordinary citizens in Russia don't believe that North Korea can attack anyone. For Pyongyang, unleashing aggression against the South and Japan equals suicide. And North Korean leaders, despite their numerous faults, are not suicidal maniacs. They are so cautious that they don't even dare as yet to introduce overdue reforms in the country: Kim Jong-il and his entourage are afraid that economic innovations will weaken their grip on their own population. A war against the formidable foes is much more dangerous than reforms for Kim Jong-il.

A military operation against the North will lead to an uncontrollable, unpredictable development of events. A war with participation of big powers cannot be entirely excluded. There is a plenty of evidence in the history of mankind when theoretically quick, easy military campaigns turned into nightmares for everyone, even for those who initially did not have anything to do with the conflict.

An assault on the DPRK will be detrimental to the international law and will undermine the entire global security system. It will give a cue to weak states: there are no international bodies and norms that can defend them against a military invasion from outside. The weak ones will be tempted to deter potential aggressors with their own WMD. As for strong and ambitious states, the signal for them will be this: if you have an enemy it is O.K. to use force against him. Such cues and signals will influence future policies of increasing number of countries of East and South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, etc.

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Last, but not least, the war will lead to tremendous losses of human lives. Tens of thousands of innocent people will be killed only because somebody somewhere decided to make life happier in Korea by waging a war.

The second proposed strategy of the solution in Korea boils down to strangling the DPRK through pressures on it and its isolation. I am sure that Russia will never support this strategy either. There are many countries in the world with regimes no better than the one in Pyongyang. And the USA and other democratic countries don't mind cooperating with them. So, first of all, Russians don't feel that the DPRK deserves such a harsh treatment. Second, this method is inhuman. One should not in the name of liberating North Korean population from the communist yoke starve this very population to death. The elite of the DPRK will anyhow manage to feed itself; it is simple people who are bound to suffer most.

Third, the strangulation strategy will not necessarily achieve the planned result — the collapse of the communist regime. But it will certainly provoke Pyongyang to double efforts in the defense sector, including the production of WMD. Let's remember the historical lessons. Back in the late 1980s, the DPRK lost its nuclear ally, the USSR, and faced mounting attempts by Seoul and Washington to speed up the demise of the communist regime. Reacting to these formidable circumstances, Pyongyang decided to go nuclear in order to stop potential interference or even outright aggression from outside. Nowadays the reaction to the tough, threatening policies of the enemies will be the same. There is of course a chance that the strangulation policy will finally work. The DPRK regime will collapse. The process will start with loosening of control by Pyongyang over the population, decreasing respect for authority, dramatic growth of crime and corruption, open criticism of the leadership by swelling number of dissidents, spontaneous local uprisings, struggles in ruling circles for power and over policy issues — all familiar scenes observed in other former communist countries.

The specifics of the North Korean situation will be that South Korea will soon get involved in the turmoil. There will be crossings of the 38th parallel in both directions; appeals by North Korean organizations to the government, people and different political and social groups in the South; and moves by South Korean official and nongovernmental organizations to help protesters and the unfortunate in the North.

As a result, the situation might become even more complicated. Communist leaders, under threat of physical destruction, would try to slow down and even stop the change. They may find some support, or at least sympathy, among leftists in the South. Fighting in various parts of the peninsula can break out.

Sooner or later, though, the communist regime in the North will totally collapse. After that, a new and quite painful chapter in the history of Korea will begin - that is, the accommodation and merger into one entity of two parts of a country that for decades existed under opposing ideological, political, social and economic conditions.

The reunification will see the end of the momentum evident in the ROK's economy and will result in the peninsula's crisis in economic and political terms. The accommodation of the military into a post-reunification Korea will present a problem of an unparalleled magnitude, creating frictions and even major disruption in the society. Economic integration will pose serious problems due to the different levels of economic development of the DPRK and ROK as well as to the antagonistic economic systems and philosophies.

Millions of communists and their family members will have to find a meaningful place in a unified Korea. Complaints will be heard from simple citizens of the former DPRK who are totally unprepared for life in a competitive capitalist society. Nostalgia for "socialism" should emerge. The population of the South will also feel dissatisfaction: the level of material life will go down as the burden of North Korea becomes widely felt. Such reunification may result in a real failure with an extended period of political, economic and social dislocation.

To avoid negative repercussions, a creative solution is to be found to the current US-DPRK nuclear crisis.

A true multilateral accord would encompass energy needs, security pledges, and an enhanced commitment to regional stability. In exchange, the DPRK must unambiguously recommit to the NPT, and provide a credible basis for the elimination of its nuclear weapons potential. I see no reason why Russia cannot be more fully enlisted in this effort, especially with regard to North Korean energy requirements and the disposition of spent reactor fuel. To the extent that the United States and North Korea remain unprepared to undertake actions to advance the prospect of an agreement, regional states must offer credible alternatives that do more than simply sustain the current impasse. Indeed, the United States has openly urged regional actors to assume a higher profile, though Washington envisions this more in terms of containing and constraining the DPRK, rather than providing it added inducements to move toward an acceptable outcome. Should neither the U.S. nor the DPRK be prepared to accept anything short of maximal policy goals, regional actors must begin to define partial measures that avoid an acute crisis or profound instability on the peninsula, while also advancing critical non-proliferation goals. Such an effort might ultimately help convince Washington and Pyongyang to accept a multilateral outcome that addresses their respective concerns, into which a bilateral agreement could be embedded.

Engagement policies

As for the long-term and final solution to the Korean problem its essence should be achievement between the North and the South of a true peaceful coexistence by engaging the DPRK in intensive contacts with the ROK and the rest of the world and by promoting gradual reforms of the North Korean economy and society. Pyongyang will be responsive to flexible strategy. When back in 2000 Kim Jong-il agreed to a summit with Kim Dae-jung he meant business. Pyongyang needed to overcome the Cold War heritage in its relations with the South. The DPRK had plunged deep into a chronic economic and social crisis, which could be solved only through open door policy and internal reforms. The rapprochement with the ROK promised to give the North an access to Southern finances, technologies and goods. It could also help obtain diplomatic recognition and various concessions from the USA as well as attract large-scale economic aid from the entire West. The accommodation on the peninsula had to strengthen the security of the DPRK, which was increasingly difficult to maintain because of economic weakness and expanding military preparations by Washington and its allies in the Far East.

The inter-Korean detente was very important to the Kim Jong-il's regime internally. The top leader had done little to impress associates of his ability to bring the nation to a better future. On the contrary, things went from bad to worse for North Korea. Lack of initiative in the face of mounting difficulties deepened disenchantment among leading figures and cadres of the regime as well as among wide circles of population.

Kim Jong-il's decision to reverse the passive foreign policy and to make a bold step of meeting ROK's president at once woke up the North Korean establishment and the entire society. A long-forgotten air of excitement, hopes and optimism reappeared during those days in the DPRK. Such expectations were reinforced by other fresh initiatives on the part of the supreme leader: his first foreign trip to the PRC and the resumption of active exchanges with Russia.

So there are reasons to believe that Kim Jong-il was aiming at a real rapprochement with the South and through it a long-term engagement with the West balanced by simultaneous reinforcement of ties with China and Russia. It was only the toughening of the American policies by the new Administration that scared the DPRK back to xenophobia. However, underlining motives of Pyongyang for a genuine dialogue with the outside world are still valid.

The effective engagement strategy requires, from my point of view, application of these basic principles:

Four outside powers equally participate and cooperate with each other in the settlement on the Korean peninsula. Rivalry among these powers and attempts to exclude Russia or any other state among the four from the settlement will only slow down or disrupt the process.

Four outside powers establish diplomatic relations with the North. The cross-recognition idea on the Korean peninsula was developed by Americans and supported by the ROK and Japan. However after first the USSR and then China established diplomatic relations with the South, Washington and Tokyo did not make similar steps towards the North. Moreover, numerous preliminary conditions have been advanced which Pyongyang must meet before recognition may take place.

The four powers guarantee non-interference in the internal affairs of the North.

For the reasons explained above Russia appraises very highly of the engagement policy, initiated by former ROK President Kim Dae-jung, which is now continued by the new President Roh Moo-hyun. This policy does not promise quick breakthroughs and an immediate unification of Korea, but there is no reasonable alternative to this policy. If the ROK returns to the old line, it will provoke military conflicts or, so to say “at best,” an uncontrollable collapse of the DPRK with the ensuing chaos and shift of the unbearable North Korean burden on the economy and society of the ROK.

Contributions by outside powers

Russia will wholeheartedly welcome softening of the American posture towards North Korea. Washington is unhappy with Kim Jong-il's regime for two major reasons: the DPRK's nuclear-missiles programs and its totalitarian practices. If Kim Jong-il becomes convinced that America is not about to destroy his regime, both reasons will lose ground: the DPRK will surely abandon expensive military programs and will move in the direction of reforms.

Russia's strength to contribute to the inter-Korean rapprochement lies in two factors: historical influence on the DPRK and a genuine interest in a strong unified Korean state. Despite recent upheavals in Russia-DPRK relations North Korean leadership looks at Russia with a special feeling as a country, which helped to create the DPRK and keep it afloat in the 1950—1980s with massive aid. President Putin's overtures towards the North have greatly increased Pyongyang's trust in Russia. Active participation of friendly Russia in the settlement process will certainly make North Korea more self-assured, less worried about military and other real or imagined threats from the side of opponents. Subsequently Pyongyang may become more flexible and forthcoming at the negotiation table. Especially that, unlike the communist Soviet Union, present-day democratic Russia will use its influence on the DPRK only for constructive purposes, trying to bring old adversaries closer to each other.

Inclusion of Moscow into the settlement process will in its turn help to promote economic cooperation of the two Koreas with Russia. And this cooperation can prove to be of great value now to both. Economic interests require the ROK to develop new markets for its products, and Russia, whose economy is on the way of recovery, may greatly increase imports of South Korean products. As for the North, it desperately needs Russian raw materials. With Moscow as a partner in the settlement negotiations the DPRK will certainly have a better access to Russian resources.

Talking about Russia's role in the Korean settlement one should not forget that the ultimate goal of the settlement is preparation for unification of Korea and unification itself. And in those final stages of the process Russia will be even more instrumental than now.

Russia, unlike other big powers, has absolutely nothing to lose in case of unification of the Korean nation. A strong Korea will not pose a security, political or economic challenge to Russia (as it will to Japan and China). Instead a unified Korean state will help Moscow to balance activities of the two Far Eastern giants — Japan and China. Moscow can expect a Korean support in its conflicts with other neighbors. Russia will get other benefits as well:

Peace in Korea will secure peace in Northeast Asia, which in turn would stabilize Russia's position in the region. These developments will benefit Russia as it faces transitional difficulties in politics, economics and military affairs.

Development of the coastal sector of Russia's Siberia is a major national objective. But such a development cannot be realized without peace in Korea. Stability and international cooperation in the neighboring areas are necessary for Russia's development.

In the development of Siberia and its coastal areas Russia needs Korean participation and collaboration. This in turn necessitates the unification of Korea.

A security benefit can be envisioned by the buildup of a North-East Asian regional security system. Russia may take an initiative to form a peace structure in collaboration with Korea, Japan and China. East Asia needs such a common security tool to resolve various innate conflicts. Navies will certainly play a very prominent role in such a system.

It equally should be noticed that Russian ambitions in Korea are now quite limited and cannot be compared with those of other big powers. If Stalin longed for the domination over the entire Korea while his heirs reduced their ambitions to the North exclusively, presently Russia simply wants to be present in Korea (it does not mind American, Chinese or Japanese advances in Korea as long as they don't undermine Russian positions).

Another important point is that Moscow's posture vis-à-vis North Korea is quite favorable to the true security interests of South Korea. Russia does not provide any military aid to the DPRK; it is against a build-up of the North Korean armed forces. It categorically opposes any designs of Pyongyang to create a nuclear arsenal. At the same time Russia supplies advanced military hardware to the ROK and is ready to continue doing it. The Kremlin will oppose in an active fashion any attempts of the North to provoke an armed conflict on the Korean peninsula.

Stages

Now how do I see the tactics of the engagement strategy in Korea?

The first stage should constitute, in my view, assistance to the DPRK in acquiring the sense of security and international acceptance. It should become a kind of appeasement. The following is necessary:

Full normalization of relations of the USA and Japan with North Korea.

Thorough implementation of the nuclear accord between Washington and Pyongyang.

Unilateral moves by the USA aimed at reducing the level of military activities and presence on the Korean peninsula. Cancellation of any major joint American-South war games.

Various goodwill gestures by the international community to Pyongyang.

Of course, most of these proposals may sound counter-productive. One can argue that, if implemented, they will make the present Stalinist regime in the North stronger and will prolong its lifetime. I don't think that will happen. To the contrary, a friendly treatment of the North by the South and the international community will induce changes in the North Korean society. Reform-minded people in the upper layers of the DPRK's establishment will get powerful arguments in their quest for the transformation of the regime. It will be more and more difficult for the hardliners to resist to the changes.

The second stage of the settlement in Korea must be devoted to the creation of the proper infrastructure of North-South ties. The most important feature is development of large-scale economic cooperation of South Korea, the USA, Japan and other countries with the DPRK. It will not only raise confidence of Pyongyang in its traditional adversaries and help to change the North Korean society, but it will make economies of the two parts of Korea more compatible and ready for merger. The stronger the DPRK's economy is the easier the burden of unification will be for the ROK.

Cultural exchanges should follow closely economic interactions. If such contacts work, then military proposals can be revived and fulfilled.

The third stage should produce an intensified cooperation between the two parts of the Korean nation, in the sphere of economy. Joint ventures may be supplemented with equal right for activities of Northern and Southern capital throughout Korea, free movement of funds, goods, and technology across the 38th parallel. Professors, students and various professionals will be freely exchanged.

Seoul and Pyongyang will accord official diplomatic recognition to each other; a network of relations between executive and legislative branches of government will be established. The two sides will sign peace treaty and the ancient military arrangements in Korea and the whole Far East will be replaced with a new appropriate system. Political collaboration of the two Koreas in the international arena may become a reality.

The fourth and final stage of the integration-unification process can start only when North Korean society is substantially, even drastically different from its present state. The DPRK should have a rather developed hybrid market economy, relatively open society, the supremacy of law in the society, a transparent military system, a reformist-minded, responsible and predictable government. Considering the fact that North Korean economy is relatively small in size, that the country possesses high-quality and cheap labor force as well as abundant natural resources and developed industrial base, the North can quickly achieve economic progress while liberalizing its political system. Of course, South Korea should also by that time move further down the road of democratization.

That's when talks can start on establishment of a confederation, then federation and finally a Unitarian state of Korea.

If such scenario develops, the unification process may take many years but it will be relatively smooth and eventually successful. So as I see it, Koreans should not set goals to achieve unification by a certain date, but rather prepare for a long, slow period of mutual accommodation of the North and the South.

I should like to add here that Russia may be very helpful in this final transition period when North Koreans will have to adjust to new economic, political and social realities.

It is clear that immediately after unification most North Korean plants and factories will lose their usefulness and stop. Russia can in such a case become instrumental in modernizing those plants and factories since most of them had been built by Soviets and according to their designs. After that Russia will become the principle consumer of the output of these enterprises.

At the same time Russia will be the only country able and interested to absorb North Korean work force left without jobs (due to the difficulties with the old economic system). Millions of Koreans from the North will be looking for suitable jobs and the Russian Far East will be prepared to take them all.

Russia will also become a major supplier of spare parts for the North Korean enterprises (they are needed now, but Pyongyang does not have money to buy them). Russia will be the cheapest and the most convenient exporter of oil, gas and electricity to the Northern part of Korea (it will become possible through the budget of the unified Korea).

Moscow may be useful as well in:

- developing railroad links between Korean peninsula and Europe;
- surveys of mineral deposits in the North (Russia has in its Possession large quantities of data based on surveys done in the 1950s);
reeducation of North Korean workers;
teaching North Korean students;
modernizing the armed forces of the North;
buying agricultural products;
developing special economic zones;
- supporting unified Korea in its dealings with Japan and China.

After the transition period is over, Russia and unified Korea may become mutually beneficial partners in the Far East politically, economically, and strategically.

The ultimate solution of the Korean problem will not only settle the WMD issue in Korea, but it will also help to eliminate one of the main sources of international tensions in the Far East and promote global non-proliferation goals.