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The Fifth Term of President Putin: Prospects for Russia's Foreign Policy and Korean Peninsula

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The presidential election was held in Russia from March 15 to 17, 2024. The election results confirmed Putin's victory with an overwhelming majority, exceeding 87%. President Putin's term is for the next 6 years, and if given another opportunity for re-election in 2030, he could remain in power even until 2036.

Russia, determined to disrupt the global order and disregard international agreements, is expected to continue its strong anti-American and anti-Western diplomatic offensive during Putin's fifth term in office. Even if the war in Ukraine concludes with Russia in a position of superiority, it is highly unlikely that the relations between Russia and the U.S. and the West would be restored to normal relations. Some speculate that if President Trump is re-elected in the upcoming U.S. Presidential Election, there might be a chance for a recovery in U.S.-Russia relations, but President Putin and Russian policymakers never mention the normalization of U.S.-Russia relations. Russia's ultimate goal is to end the U.S.-centric unipolar system and establish a multipolar world order where several regional powers, including Russia, exert influence. Therefore, Russia has no intention of abandoning its aggressive foreign policy until the decline of U.S. hegemony becomes evident. Furthermore, with Western countries' economic sanctions against Russia not yielding significant results and the

support from the U.S. and the EU for Ukraine falling short, Putin appears poised to pursue a more audacious and bold external strategy aimed at striking a blow to the status of the U.S. and the West.

A more detailed forecast for Putin's fifth-term foreign policy would entail the following: Firstly, Russia will likely continue to thwart NATO's eastward expansion, which Putin has identified as one of the main causes of invasion of Ukraine. By doing so, Russia aims to sow discord between the U.S. and European countries while fostering divisions within Europe itself. Secondly, as Russia seeks to counterbalance NATO and confront Europe from its western borders, stable management of its eastern borders becomes crucial. Consequently, Russia is expected to prioritize strategic alignment and comprehensive cooperation with China. Particularly since declaring a 'civilizational' severance with the West, Russia has shifted its focus towards building relations with authoritarian regimes in Eurasia, including China, Iran, and North Korea. Therefore, the possibility of a new authoritarian bloc forming in this region cannot be ruled out.

Thirdly, Russia is expected to focus on strengthening relations with the Global South countries. Leveraging conflicts such as those between Israel and Hamas, Russia aims to diminish U.S. influence and bolster its diplomatic status in the Middle East. Countries in Africa are also poised to become the main diplomatic arena for Russia. Russia intends to consolidate the Global South countries under the banner of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism, claiming that the U.S. and Western countries have exploited Asian and African nations under the guise of globalization.

The policies regarding the Korean Peninsula during Putin's fifth term will be formulated and pursued as an extension of the foreign policy deliberated above. Over the span of the next six years, various factors, both major and minor, will undoubtedly influence these policies. However, it is anticipated that Russia will unwaveringly pursue the following three courses of action on the Korean Peninsula: Firstly, Russia will not tolerate the collapse of the North Korean regime. Russia's foreign policy underwent a complete reversal towards anti-American and anti-Western sentiments following the Ukraine War. Consequently, Russia has shifted towards supporting and endorsing North Korea's struggle against the United States and its allied forces in the Korean

Peninsula. The noticeable and rapid intensification of Russia's close ties with North Korea since August of last year is not merely limited to the exchange of North Korean weapons and ammunition for Russian military technology. The common perception and interests that bind Russia and North Korea together are driving anti-American solidarity. While there are limitations, Russia can assist North Korea in fulfilling its role as a geopolitical buffer zone by concurrently providing economic cooperation and aid substantial enough to prevent the collapse of the Kim Jong-un regime. Russia can abandon its previously passive stance towards North Korea and emerge as an active supporter, striving to alter North Korea's economic reliance solely on China and potentially engaging in the construction of a commercial zone involving China, Russia, and North Korea.

Secondly, Russia may endeavor to restore economic cooperation with South Korea, but political and security cooperation will likely be unattainable. South Korea has condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine in line with international law and universal values and has joined in imposing sanctions against Russia. However, Russia has repeatedly emphasized the U.S. influence behind South Korea and disregarded South Korea's sovereign decisions. As evidenced by President Putin's recent statement of "North Korea has its own nuclear umbrella," it is not hesitant in recognizing North Korea as a nuclear weapons state status. Despite persistent differences in political and security perceptions, Russia is expected to make efforts to restore economic relations with South Korea. Likewise, South Korea is likely to engage in economic cooperation once the prerequisites are met. However, the timing of such developments remains uncertain, because the normalization of relations between South Korea and Russia will only be prolonged if Russia continues to tolerate North Korea's nuclear provocations while passing on the responsibility for security concerns onto South Korea, the U.S., and Japan.

Thirdly, Russia will maintain coordination and cooperation with China in dealing with the Korean Peninsula issue. Particularly concerning for South Korea is whether China will join the anti-American solidarity by strengthening its ties with Russia and North Korea, but this should be monitored over time. Currently, China appears to be drawing a line with regard to the tightening relations between Russia and North Korea,



seemingly uncomfortable with Russia stepping up as a sponsor that replaces China. Nevertheless, as long as China and Russia are interested in weakening U.S. influence on the Korean peninsula and considering the survival of the North Korean regime to this end, they will manage to overcome minuscule differences of opinion to further coordinate and cooperate. Moreover, considering Russia's increasing dependence on China due to its severance of relations with the West, it is unlikely that Russia and China will engage in conflict over the Korean peninsula.

In fact, the above reflects principles Russia has been upholding even when relations between Russia and South Korea were amicable in the past. What has changed is the significant increase in North Korea's geopolitical value to Russia and its importance as a cooperative partner. Additionally, the level of economic cooperation between South Korea and Russia is now more constrained by political and security factors than in the past. The issue lies in the strong likelihood of such strained relations persisting for a considerable length of time. Given North Korea's outspoken commitment to using nuclear weapons to uphold its regime, while denying reunification and kinship, it is unlikely to change its stance. The security cooperation between the ROK, the U.S., and Japan will only be strengthened if threats from North Korea persist, and North Korea will attempt to exploit efforts to suppress it by South Korea and its cooperative partners as a pretext to further consolidate a new Cold War dynamics. At this juncture, it is concerning that Russia, under Putin's fifth term characterized by isolation, non-cooperation, and aggression, could provide inspiration, grounds for miscalculation, and concrete methods for Kim Jong-un's brinkmanship and madman strategy. ©KINU 2024

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