

## Putin's Korea Policy Outlook and Response Strategies for South Korea

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As expected, Vladimir Putin won the recent presidential elections and secured his position as the leader of Russia for the next six years. If reelected he could remain in power for up to 12 years to come. Putin's resurgence in power had already become a foregone conclusion due to a number of factors, including longing for a strong Russia to fill the void felt after the collapse of the Soviet system, the lack of a popular alternative to Putin, and the relatively less advanced political culture of Russia compared to that of the West. Considering the strong influence that Putin has exercised under the administration of current President Dmitry Medvedev, this recent election cannot really be considered a transfer of power, and there is little likelihood of a significant change to Russia's general policy direction. However since Putin rode to victory on a platform of building a "Strong Russia," it seems that certain changes are inevitable, and these changes are likely to manifest prominently in Russia's foreign policy.

### The Foundations of Russia's Foreign Policy

Russia is beginning to see itself in the role of a "balancer" in global politics, with the goal of restoring the US-Russia bipolar global order of the past. Already in late February Putin clarified the foundation of his foreign policy via an

article in a domestic newspaper. He criticized the West's intervention in the crisis in Syria and the Iranian nuclear problem, declaring his intention to oppose it. Russia has a naval base in Syria and enjoys close cooperation with Iran in economic and military matters. He also praised China's political and economic rise and emphasized that China and Russia share a common view of the world order, foreshadowing stronger China–Russia cooperation in the future.

The basic pillars of Putin's foreign policy can be summarized as opposing Western dominance of the world order, cooperating with China, and responding forcefully against anything harmful to Russia's national interests. Putin's statements made clear that under his leadership a Libya-type solution would not be tolerated, hinting at the possibility of greater tensions between Russia and the US-led Western powers. In the same vein, as Putin's re-election became official, some media began referring to "the end of the era of US–Russia cooperation" and "the possibility of a new Cold War phase." There are also concerns about the impact this may have on the international political structure for resolving the North Korean nuclear problem. Since the Asia Pacific region is a focal point of the US–China hegemonic rivalry, expanded Russia–China cooperation could have a negative impact on efforts by the ROK–US alliance to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem. If Russia becomes more cooperative in the special relationship between North Korea and China it could put greater strain on South Korea's policies vis-à-vis the North.

However, the resurgent Putin administration will be constrained by several factors. First, his approval rating is not nearly as high as it was in the old days, and the anti-Putin camp has grown more organized. Considering that the majority of the opposition is made up of young people and Russia's civil society is growing steadily, President Putin will find it difficult to execute foreign policy as freely as he would like. Russia's weak trade structure, with 70% of exports comprised of underground resources like oil and gas, will also prove problematic for Putin. The secret to Putin's popularity has been economic growth, so another global financial crisis or dip in oil prices could seriously challenge the stability of the Putin regime. Thus there will be limits to Putin's ability to push forward foreign policies that could negatively influence the global economy.

## Outlook for Russian Policies toward the Korean Peninsula

Putin claims that he is "opposed to North Korea's nuclear weapons" but also "opposed to destabilization of the Kim Jong Eun regime." Thus his policy toward the Koreas can be described as maintaining equal distance from both the South

and the North. This reflects the same omni-directional diplomacy that has formed the basis of Russian foreign policy since the collapse of the Soviet system. In regard to the Korean peninsula, Russia has maintained a pragmatic stance, directly pursuing strategies based on practical benefits rather than philosophy or factional logic. Since Russia's strategic options for involvement in Korean peninsula issues are limited, it is fair to say that it chose this pragmatic approach for structural reasons. Thus Russia has shown enormous interest in cooperative projects with the two Koreas, such as the project to link the Trans-Siberia Railroad and the ROK-DPRK-Russia gas line project which Russia and North Korea agreed upon during Kim Jong Il's visit to Russia in August 2011. Even with inter-Korean relations at a stalemate, Russia has pushed forward with advanced planning for the railroad connection project and maintained related economic cooperation projects with North Korea.

In September 2011 Russia's IMEMO research institute released a report entitled "Global Outlook 2030" which assessed that North Korea is showing a stronger likelihood of collapse and that the two Koreas would enter a practical phase of unification in the late 2020s. This is not the official view of the Russian government, but since it comes from an eminent national policy research institute it does provide insight into the thinking of Russia's Korea specialists and policy-makers regarding the issues on the peninsula. The IMEMO report indicates that Russia's future policy toward the Korean peninsula will be developed with a focus on South Korea. Thus we need to change our thinking on the possibility that Putin's re-emergence presents new opportunities for South Korea.

## South Korea's Response Strategies

With Putin in power the ROK-DPRK-Russia gas pipeline project may gain more momentum. In some versions this project has also extended to Japan, and thus it could create an important new window for Russian energy exports. It could also lend added impetus to a long-awaited project to develop the Siberian Maritime Province. For these reasons, this pipeline project could become one of the major tasks for Putin's government. This would have tremendous significance for South Korea by helping it to break out of its "energy island" situation, and could also provide a stable source of income for North Korea. In this sense the gas pipeline project could act as a catalyst to change the paradigm of inter-Korean relations. In addition to the economic benefits of the project it could have geopolitical significance in giving Russia greater leverage over North Korea. Since a precondition of the gas project is to ease the security concerns on the peninsula, the project's successful implementation will signify that inter-Korean relations

have stabilized. There may even be consideration of a ROK–DPRK–Russia summit to negotiate the project. Successful implementation will require a trilateral summit to reach an agreement on security measures, and the three sides may also reach an agreement on the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong issues and measures to prevent similar incidents in the future. If a pragmatic trilateral summit on the gas pipeline were held in Moscow or the Russian Far East it would help South Korea to mitigate any negative impact on the elections or lame-duck pressure on the current administration.

From the perspective of Russia, which pursues economic cooperation with both Koreas, peninsular stability is of vital importance, and the North Korean nuclear program is a major burden. In this sense Russia and South Korea share a common interest. Russia holds a very pragmatic view of Korean unification, since it would add impetus to numerous projects including connecting the Trans–Siberian Railroad, the ROK–DPRK–Russia gas pipeline, and development of the Siberian Maritime Province. This makes Russia a direct target of South Korea’s “unification diplomacy” effort. In the process of seeking a solution to the North Korean nuclear issue, we will need to elicit Russia’s direct cooperation and strengthen cooperative relations in a variety of areas. We must expand our cooperative relationship with Russia, which is relatively weaker than our relations with the US, China, and Japan, and actively work to cultivate our public diplomacy. Russia stands to be a major benefactor of Korean peninsula stability and the unification process. The resurgent Putin regime offers a fresh opportunity for South Korea’s unification diplomacy, and now is the time to actively seize this opportunity.