

## Russia's Reassessment of the Korean Peninsula

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Russia is impatient for action on the Korean Peninsula, which it views through the lens of the world order established by its victory in 1945. Given Russian views of China's sinocentric approach, the U.S. anti-*byungjin* approach, and South Korea's Eurasian Initiative, a hardline "turn to North Korea" is not surprising. As part of the "turn to the East," this reflects three factors: historical national identity, geopolitical strategy, and geo-economic developmental plans for the Russian Far East. The result is increased encouragement for North Korea and increased pressure on South Korea with the implicit threat of tilting further to the North if recent policy, such as Park Geun-hye's snubbing of Putin's invitations, is not changed. While the North Koreans are playing Moscow off against Beijing, the northern triangle is more complicated than that. Russia's "turn to China" and Pyongyang's need for Beijing are likely to put Beijing in the driver's seat as the next stages of diplomatic maneuvering unfold.

**Keywords:** historical memory, turn to the East, Eurasian Initiative, six-party talks, new cold war

None of the other countries involved in the six-party talks is satisfied with current diplomacy over North Korea, but, Russia is, arguably, most impatient to intervene with a strategy to alter the thinking in both Pyongyang and Seoul. It is now the most active in bilateral "encouragement" of the North Koreans and the most problematic in bilateral "blackmail" toward the South Koreans, i.e., its implicit message is that if Seoul's policies are deemed to be insufficiently favorable, Moscow is prepared to do more in support of Pyongyang. Putin was expecting Kim Jong-un in Moscow for the 70th anniversary victory celebration and military parade, but barely a week ahead Kim reversed his plans to attend. Yet, that should not distract us from what Russia

was seeking to accomplish or how it might proceed in subsequent overtures to the North Koreans and hardball diplomacy with the South Koreans. Wishful thinking about Russia's intentions — its continued support for denuclearization, its diplomacy conducive to cooperation to resume the six-party talks, and its lack of overt Cold War rhetoric in official statements about North Korea — should not distract us from what is written and said by Russian specialists amid today's overall policy context.

### **Views of Russian Intentions**

Views of Russia's intentions are split. One viewpoint is that Russia is faithful to the spirit of 5 vs. 1, sharing the same objectives as the other four that have engaged in consultations since the start of the six-party talks in 2003,<sup>1</sup> while still prioritizing denuclearization. Not only has its diplomacy of late not been interfering, a proactive approach by it actually serves to facilitate what Seoul and Washington are seeking. When Kim Jong-un did not appear in Moscow, this seemed to confirm the view that Russia was offering him too little and was even asking him to make concessions.

Even if there is no evidence to this effect, some writers remain hopeful that Russia is amenable to joint efforts to find a way forward to resolve the North Korean issue. Shimotomai Nobuo analyzed the rapidly improving relations between Russia and North Korea by April 2015 as a "small renaissance," which he argues can be directly linked to the Ukraine situation.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after that crisis arose, Russia forgave USD 10 billion in loans. It is planning to increase bilateral trade to USD 1 billion by 2020, and there is talk of no-visa travel to the Russian Far East, as some see both ideological closeness and anti-U.S. stances as factors. Both states opposed U.S. military exercises

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1. Dmitry Suslov, comments at panel, "Reordering U.S.-Russia Relations," *Asan Plenum*, Seoul, April 29, 2015.

2. Shimotomai Nobuo, "Russia and North Korea" (in Japanese), *Toa*, no. 4 (2015), pp. 42-48.

and see interference in human rights as just a U.S. pretext. Shimotomai downplays ideology and views Putin — part of his turn to Asia — as seeking balance between the South and the North, while Kim Jong-un is venting anger over China drawing closer to the South. This viewpoint toward both parties offers hope not only for Japanese diplomacy to Russia but also for regional balancing without close Sino-Russia ties. It takes the side of those who minimize concern about Russia's wooing of the North.

Some in Russia put a benign spin on its "turn to North Korea," insisting that Moscow is serious about denuclearization, that it is not in defiance of others in the six-party talks, and that it is guiding Pyongyang into a transition that can work, combining reform with confidence in political stability. They draw the lesson from transitions in China, Vietnam, and Russia that the old elite solidifies its power, that a degree of market reform and opening does not undermine central control of economic levers, and that, at least in Beijing and Moscow, resistance to the U.S.-led regional or global order need not be diminished. Not just is Moscow teaching these lessons, it offers its support in making them come true. Thus, they rationalize veering toward the North.

There is another viewpoint; however, that Russia is approaching North Korea in accord with thinking that a new cold war has begun, not only in Europe, but in Asia, and given its isolation, Russia must value a friendly partner in the North, not a U.S. ally in the South.<sup>3</sup> Given the bulk of recent writings and the main direction of the policy on display in Moscow in recent months, this article gravitates to the second viewpoint. It is not just recent writings following the Ukraine crisis that lead to the conclusion that Russia perceives North Korea through the prism of constructing a new regional order. This is a

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3. Alexander Zhebin, "Carte Blanche: How to maintain balance of power on the Korean Peninsula" (in Russian), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, April 8, 2015; Georgy Toloraya, "Kim Jong Un's Diplomatic Debut: A View from Russia," *38 North*, January 20, 2015. <http://38north.org/2015/01/gtoloraya012015/> (date accessed: May 14, 2015); Alexander Vorontsov, "Korean Unification: A Fleeting Opportunity," Strategic Cultural Foundation, November 13, 2014.

mainstay in publications appearing in recent years.<sup>4</sup>

We do not know if Kim Jong-un did not go to Moscow, as planned, for the May 9 celebration due to domestic politics (insecurity in power), bilateral reasons (lack of Russian incentives), or strategic calculations (determination to remain outside the world of diplomacy in single-minded pursuit of becoming recognized as a nuclear weapons power). The impression left with observers may be that Kim's "pivot to Russia" in 2014-2015 is not very consequential. While Russia has been the easiest target for escaping North Korea's isolation in the six-party talks grouping, perhaps its limited degree of support has fallen short of the North's demands. Yet, Moscow's pursuit is still on course. Pyongyang is not likely to dismiss such overtures, and the key to analysis must be what Russia is considering as it prepares for further contact.

*Asahi Shimbun* reported that not only did Kim Jong-un send another top official in his stead, he sent Putin a congratulatory telegram, while on May 8 in Pyongyang, Putin arranged a ceremony to bestow on Kim a 70th anniversary victory medal. It said, few think that Kim's absence means that relations with Russia will deteriorate.<sup>5</sup> Both countries find it in their interest to use the other to contain the United States, and North Korea is using Russia effectively to pursue China with triangular goals. Much Japanese coverage of the Putin-Xi summit on May 8 and their joint attendance at the victory parade centered on shared historical understanding opposed to the United States and Japan, which bodes well for inclusion of North Korea, perhaps as early as the September 3 victory celebration in Beijing, where the victorious mood will be sustained against those who are accused of seeking to undo the results by reviving fascism in Europe and Japanese militarism but, presumably, also by policies to cause regime

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4. M. I. Krupianko and L. G. Aresshidze, *The U.S. and East Asia: Struggle for "new order"* (in Russian), (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2010).

5. "Russia's Military Parade Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of Victory against Germany Boasts Weapons Advancement" (in Japanese), *Asahi Shimbun*, May 10, 2015, p. 6.

change in North Korea and absorption of it by South Korea.<sup>6</sup> Given the stress on history versus Japan in China and now in Russia too, North Korea is a natural partner; its historical significance is viewed similarly in the two countries.<sup>7</sup>

## The Intersection of Policies in Multiple Countries

To grasp the dynamics of the Russia-DPRK-ROK triangle with China and the United States looming in the background, we should start with the intersection of policies in three countries: 1) Beijing's *sinocentric* approach that mostly prioritizes "peace and stability," while recently leaving it unclear if denuclearization has risen to the first priority; 2) Washington's *anti-byungjin* approach that regards deterrence as the fallback position if Pyongyang remains unyielding; and 3) Seoul's *Eurasian Initiative*, which promises economic benefits to Russia, but makes them largely dependent on the opening of North Korea. We then consider: Pyongyang's *pivot to Russia*, which seeks military, economic, and diplomatic support; and Moscow's *turn to the East*, which might better be called "pivot to China." In regard to Moscow's policies, we can distinguish historical national identity, geopolitical strategy, geo-economic interests, and plans for the development of the Russian Far East. How Russia perceives the intersection of policies in the five countries most attentive to North Korea and is combining the four concerns driving its policies is critical to grasping its willingness to cooperate with strategies that prioritize denuclearization and even reunification. In this framework, the Korean Peninsula is only an object of great power rivalry.

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6. "Country Report: Japan," *The Asan Forum*, No. 3 (May-June), 2015.

7. Gilbert Rozman, "Historical Memories and International Relations in Northeast Asia," in *Criminality and Collaboration: Europe and Asia Confront the Memory of World War II*, eds. Daniel Chirot, Shin Gi-Wook, and Dan Sneider (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), pp. 211-33.

## China's Sinocentrism and Russian Policies

No matter whether we look at Moscow's policy toward Northeast Asia or Southeast Asia, the most suitable starting point is how it intersects with policy toward Beijing.

Beijing has been in the driver's seat for the past two decades, as Moscow prioritized improving relations with a rising power that shares a long border and was long seen as a rival in Asia and beyond. Beijing and Moscow supported Pyongyang for over four decades, while at times also competing for influence over it. Loss of influence over Pyongyang was a prominent theme in Russian regrets about the absence of clout in Asia from the time of the first nuclear crisis in 1993-1994.<sup>8</sup> While Putin shifted to personal diplomacy in 2000 to 2002 to regain some leverage, once the six-party talks began, following the early 2003 DPRK rejection of a special role for Russia in resolving the second nuclear crisis, the Russian position grew increasingly aligned with China's stance. Misleading talk in the United States that the line-up was 5 vs. 1, as if agreement among five states on the goal of denuclearization meant agreement on strategy and on the steps to reach that goal, obscured the Sino-Russian overlap and coordination in approach.<sup>9</sup> Because of obvious differences in geo-economic aims with Russia seeking a north-south corridor linked to its two largest Far East cities of Vladivostok and Khabarovsk and China eyeing an east-west corridor connected to its Northeast provinces of Jilin and Liaoning, there is reason to view national interests as opposed, not only because a sinocentric result would leave Russia marginalized. Recent writing on Kim Jong-un's decision not to go to Moscow on May 9, while he is presumably weighing whether to go to Beijing on September 3 for another gala to mark the 70th anniversary of victory,

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8. Gilbert Rozman, "Russian Foreign Policy in Northeast Asia," in *The International Relations of Northeast Asia*, ed. Sam Kim (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), pp. 201-24.

9. Gilbert Rozman, *Strategic Thinking about the Korean Nuclear Crisis: Four Parties Caught between North Korea and the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

also suggests a zero-sum situation.<sup>10</sup> However, as in the Cold War era, more important than competition are overlapping strategies.

Sinocentrism refers to a region centered on China reminiscent of the imperial era tributary system, requiring deference to Chinese political leadership and cultural sensitivities. The Korean Peninsula is the poster-child of this old order and the most obvious starting point for its reimposition. Russia is striking a delicate balance, both working closely with China and encouraging Korean efforts to avoid sinocentrism.

Broader conceptualization of Chinese and Russian objectives, especially in the next stage of peninsular developments, demonstrates greater correspondence of tactics. Beijing does not want South Korea to absorb North Korea, imposing a political order based on democracy and addressing human rights issues from the perspective of “universal values.” This would be equivalent to a “color revolution.” Neither does Moscow. Indeed, the convergence of views is rooted in a shared outlook on how the history of the Korean War should be portrayed, a shared understanding that long-standing support for North Korea should not be in vain, and a shared rejection of the balance of power threat from the South absorbing the North.<sup>11</sup> Attitudes that earlier Chinese were expressing more intensely, especially from 2009,<sup>12</sup> have permeated Russian writings on the Korean Peninsula in the last few years, although already during the 1990s-2000s leading Russian and Chinese specialists were hinting at their content.<sup>13</sup> Views of the Korean

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10. “Kim Jong-un Decides not to Attend Russia’s Victory Celebrations” (in Japanese), *Yomiuri Shimbun*, April 30, 2015; *Tokyo Shimbun*, May 1, 2015, p. 9.

11. Gilbert Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order: National Identities, Bilateral Relations, and East vs. West in the 2010s* (Washington DC and Stanford, CA: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2014).

12. Gilbert Rozman, “Chinese Politics and the Korean Peninsula,” in, *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies—Asia at a Tipping Point: Korea, the Rise of China, and the Impact of Leadership Transitions*, ed. idem. (Washington, DC: Korea Economic Institute, 2012), pp. 59-75.

13. Gilbert Rozman, ed., *U.S. Leadership, History, and Bilateral Relations in Northeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

War serve as a kind of litmus test. Briefly in the 1990s, they were debated. In recent years, old thinking has revived with no debate.

Despite elements of competition with China, Russians insist that the policies of the two are complementary.<sup>14</sup> Both are opposed to the U.S. “regime change” approach. Both reject pressure on Pyongyang on human rights. Together they seek to thwart the reunification goals of Seoul as well as Washington. If Beijing was in the lead in engaging Pyongyang for a time, Moscow shifted to a more forward-looking attitude in 2013-2014. If Beijing retakes the lead — after all its economic ties are much closer —, Russians insist that this does not signify a rivalry since the goals are much the same. In any case, negative remarks are directed solely at the United States and its allies.<sup>15</sup>

### **U.S. Anti-Byungjin Pressure and Russian Policies**

Insistent that Washington is guilty of aggression, containment, and unilateralism in pursuit of world domination, Moscow imputes the same motivations to its behavior in Asia as in Europe.<sup>16</sup> There is no longer any talk of policies to balance China’s power or to draw U.S. allies into multipolarity. Rather the assumption is that China is facing the same polarizing containment as Russia, and that the two must work together more closely than in the past. Despite explanations, at times, that China does not feel the same degree of urgency to confront the United States, the clear expectation is that it is only temporarily more cautious and polarization with Russia joining China is inevitable. Rather than China’s behavior causing problems, U.S. conduct is heavily blamed in Russian sources, as seen in the spring of 2015.<sup>17</sup>

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14. Mikhail Titorenko, “Russia, China, and a new world order,” (in Russian) *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn’*, No. 3, 2015.

15. Aleksandr Zhebin, “Korean problem: seeking solutions” (in Russian), *Nezavisimāia Gazeta*, April 8, 2015.

16. See the summaries of articles in “Country Report: Russia” and “Country Report: China,” both bi-monthly, in *The Asan Forum*. See [www.theasanforum.org](http://www.theasanforum.org).

17. “Country Report Russia,” *The Asan Forum* 3, no. 3 (2015).



Second to Central Asia, the shadow of sinocentrism falls on the Korean Peninsula, as the gateway to the Russian Far East and, perhaps, a harbinger of China's resurgent claims to once disputed territory there. Fear spread in the 1990s, following decades of rhetoric about the "yellow peril" and territorial threats, of Chinese flooding across the border, China's "quiet expansionism" through economic means, and one-sided trade to keep the Russian Far East as just a "colonial" raw material provider.<sup>18</sup> While these have diminished, as demagogic governors were brought to heel, there still is concern, which could be amplified by signs that Russia is being squeezed by China extending its control over North Korea, close to the strategic city of Vladivostok. For now, however, Putin and Xi insist that the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union are complementary and will go together well, while on North Korea they are so used to supporting each other they do not even have to dispel doubts.<sup>19</sup>

The centerpiece in U.S. policy toward North Korea is insistence that it abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons and other states reject its policy of "guns and butter," i.e., continuing to build its nuclear weapons and missiles capacity while seeking outside support for economic development. The opposite position is to support expanded economic ties and assistance to North Korea, perhaps claiming that as a result the North would decide on its own accord to abandon its nuclear program or, in a less disguised manner, justifying it as a military counterweight to the United States and its alliances. U.S. anti-*byungjin* policies are widely opposed in Russia.

Instead of acknowledging that Washington's anti-*byungjin* policy is a conditional approach to North Korea with the aim of supporting its integration into the global economy to the extent it is willing to advance an agenda of denuclearization, the Russian narrative consistently distorts the policy, ignores the overtures made to Pyongyang over the years, and places the onus on Washington to meet reason-

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18. Gilbert Rozman, *Northeast Asia's Stunted Regionalism: Bilateral Distrust in the Shadow of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

19. "Country Report: Japan," *The Asan Forum* 3, no. 3 (2015).

able demands for normalization of relations to counter threats of regime change.<sup>20</sup>

There is a drumbeat of calls by Russians for Washington to change course. Thus, the denuclearization goal, which Russians insist they are pursuing, is less a matter of a decision in Pyongyang than of a U.S. decision that will unlock the door to progress. This idea that Washington has it in its power to resolve the crisis has dominated in Russian publications since the beginning of the six-party talks, although the exact concessions that are needed and the excuses for Pyongyang's lack of receptivity to Washington's latest approach vary over time. On *byungjin*, the Russian position is, it is another form of regime change and undue pressure, when what is needed is quite the opposite — support for the North Korean economic development plans in order to give it the confidence to agree to denuclearization. More than the economy, it is assurances about security — bilateral and regional — that Russians see as necessary.

The critical divide over North Korea is not over denuclearization as a vague goal, but over economic support to give the North the confidence eventually to decide it does not need such weapons or economic pressure to show the North that it is isolated and has no choice but to denuclearize in order to overcome its dismal economy. In Russia, the case for economic support is widely presented, opposing U.S. thinking.

## **South Korea's Eurasian Initiative and Russian Policies**

Russians welcome Seoul's Eurasian Initiative but not for the reasons Seoul intends. Seoul sees this as enticement for North Korea, serving to coordinate with Moscow a message of large-scale economic development once preconditions are met.<sup>21</sup> In the case of Moscow, however,

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20. Valerii Denisov, "Nuclear Problem in the Korean Peninsula: is there an exit in the final state?" (in Russian), *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn*, no. 2 (2015).

21. Kim Taehwan, "Beyond Geopolitics: South Korea's Eurasia Initiative as a New Nordpolitik," *The Asan Forum* 3, no. 1 (2015).

it appears to be a way to boost North Korea's economy with or without the critical conditions Seoul requires. Indeed, the Russian message increasingly is that South Korean commitments are needed or Russia will blame Seoul for its failure to take the steps important toward resolving the crisis. Instead, it will be seen as joining the United States in a regime change strategy. The failure of Park Geun-hye to attend the Sochi Olympics and the 70th anniversary of victory in WWII celebration invite the verdict by Russians that she is too beholden to her ally, the United States, to pursue a balanced, separate foreign policy toward North Korea.

The Eurasian Initiative is but one of a number of "middle power" policies of Park Geun-hye that are proving harder to sustain in the divisive regional environment of 2015.<sup>22</sup> The Russo-U.S. divide is too great to expect to find some middle ground, and Seoul's leverage on Russia is too meager to change its course on North Korea. Russia has less money for infrastructure in line with this initiative, Seoul has less optimism that investments would prove helpful in changing Pyongyang's attitudes, and there are new barriers against Park even meeting with Putin as the Ukraine crisis persists.

## **North Korea's Pivot to Russia and Russia's Turn to the East**

Pyongyang is seeking to break out of its isolation without having to agree to steps toward denuclearization and relaxation of its military pressure on South Korea and beyond. This is unacceptable to Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. Beijing sympathizes with it in many respects, but it is insistent on denuclearization as an objective — the pathway to a complex set of negotiations through the six-party talks, which it seeks to steer toward desirable outcomes for a new regional security order and a gradual process of reunification malleable to a sinocentric state. Russia is the state with the fewest demands on North Korea

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22. Gilbert Rozman, "South Korea's Foreign Policy Options, Option 5: Rethinking Middle Power Diplomacy," *The Asan Forum* 3, no. 3 (2015).

and the most support for Korean reunification as a strong state with maximum independence from Washington and Beijing. Although it is modest in its economic generosity, Russia's growing alienation from the West and U.S. allies South Korea and Japan makes it an increasingly attractive partner. Waiting for Beijing to be more supportive — after a troubled time in 2013-2014 —, Pyongyang turned to Moscow, knowing it need not choose one or the other. Increasingly close Sino-Russian ties raise the prospect of Kim Jong-un standing side-by-side Xi and Putin, as may happen on September 3 if Kim can find a way to meet Xi's demands.

Russia's policy toward the Korean Peninsula has evolved through four discernible stages since the end of the Cold War. There are four factors, at least, impacting its shifting course: (1) thinking about its development track; (2) thinking about the Cold War; (3) thinking about the United States and its two allies in Northeast Asia; and (4) thinking about China. In the first stage through the 1990s (although it was losing force at the end of the decade), Russia was relatively hopeful about the development of Siberia and the Russian Far East through international investment. The primary assumption was that the Cold War had ended and a new era had dawned, whereby North Korea would join South Korea-led unification. Russia counted on the United States, Japan, and South Korea to engage it, to invest in it, and to integrate it into the Asia-Pacific region with economics in the forefront. Finally, China would be a good partner, but it would be prevented from becoming the dominant force in the Russian Far East through migration, investments, or political dependence. North Korea was not a major object of diplomacy, given its dreadful economic state and concern that expanding political or military ties would not serve Russia's integrationist goals.

In the second stage, through most of the 2000s, Russian confidence centered on its rise as an energy superpower, which could entice investors into Siberia and the Far East on terms favorable to it. There was still an assumption that the Cold War was over, but it was qualified by a rising belief that balance of power maneuvering had resumed. Now, Moscow could play off different states, becoming a

factor in regional diplomacy over North Korea. China's role was growing, allowing for multipolarity instead of Russia having to join a regional order determined by the United States. As a member of the six-party talks, Russia tilted toward China's position, striving also to find common ground with South Korea in order to capitalize on its energy power.

The third stage of Russia's shifting approach to the Korean Peninsula came with the global financial crisis, the collapse of the six-party talks, and the more aggressive turn in China's foreign policy. Yet, with Dmitry Medvedev following a cautious policy domestically and internationally, the full implications of this approach were left unexplained. Russia's development model was shaken, but energy prices regained their earlier peak, and Medvedev's plans for modernization muddled the picture. The main reason for growing confidence was a more arrogant attitude toward the economic conditions in the United States and the EU and the sense that the BRICS represent the wave of the future, as high growth rates in the developing world — Asia above all — will make Russia an even bigger energy superpower while it is recovering as a military superpower. New thinking about the Cold War revived its logic of military balancing, maximizing state power, and confronting ideological threats. In this period Russia reinterpreted multipolarity as a way to ride China's rise to challenge the United States, while balancing China through strengthened ties across Asia. As bipolarity intensified, Russia retained hopes for multipolarity. Its policy toward China had become increasingly contradictory, as had its handling of North Korea (a return to personal diplomacy) and South Korea (as if its engagement of North Korea would succeed). Russia's policies were facing an impasse when Putin resumed the presidency, impatient as problems were mounting at home and abroad.

The fourth stage of Russia's policy toward the Korean Peninsula began before the onset of the Ukraine crisis in March 2014 and was accelerated in the new conditions. Russia's development model was facing stagnation even before energy prices fell in late 2014. Prospects for increased investment were dim, and the EU economies had little

need for more energy from Russia. Indeed, global supplies were expanding, and Russia's energy leverage was declining. Russian leaders had decided that it was time to reestablish a sphere of economic and political control on territories from the Soviet Union, as if the Cold War had never ended. Rejecting the verdicts of 1989-1991, they regretted policies that had caused the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of its bloc. Russia's "turn to Asia" would be made possible by riding the tailwind of China's aggressive policies and also North Korea's belligerent defiance. Accepting bipolarity as the main tendency and losing hope for Tokyo and Seoul, Moscow took a more benign view of dependency on China, protesting to the point of unbelievability that stronger ties are based on equality. Its new, benign view of North Korea posited that country as a victim, which needed a champion in order to fend off U.S. threats.

### **Russia's Isolation and Rethinking about North Korea**

Moscow grew increasingly isolated in Asia in the 1970s-1980s, and this is occurring again in the mid-2010s with the big exception of its strengthening relationship with China. It is again a one-sided great power (reliant overwhelmingly on its military for this status). In place of its socialist camp and a loose partnership with India, it now has a quasi-alliance with China and the "rogue state" of North Korea as its principal partners as well as some neighbors wary of arousing its anger. Moscow is reviving a strategy of polarization, reasserting the logic of the Cold War as enshrined in calls to respect the historical verdicts of the Soviet victory in 1945. It is as if the transition in 1989-1991 is nothing more than a bad dream as far as geopolitics and national identity are concerned. This is the policy context for its overtures to the Korean Peninsula.

The Russian "turn to the East" has prioritized North Korea to a degree few realize. As early as the summer of 2000 Putin realized its significance, stopping there on his maiden trip to the region. In 2004 as Putin's distrust of the West grew, he shifted to a more sympathetic

approach to the North in the six-party talks. Returning to the presidency in 2012, Putin acted quickly to cancel most of North Korea's debts and by 2013 was drastically accelerating contacts with officials there. Pyongyang and Moscow have in common a desire to boost ties to Beijing but not to let it dictate their policies and a high priority for turning to each other as useful for ties to China.

Russians are embracing what used to be a popular theory in the West with a twist. Instead of economic development leading to democratization/political convergence and domestic stability as well as peace with other countries, such development is seen as supporting authoritarian (communist regimes), preventing convergence, and facilitating a balance of power between rival systems. Promotion of market reforms would take a back seat to strengthening the state-centered economy and an urban strata beholden to the center, as the economic gap narrowed between North and South and also the gap in confidence over which state has a superior system.

Putin's third term as president has seen a drastic upgrading in relations between Moscow and Pyongyang. Official meetings are much more frequent. A multiple of projects are at the initial stage. Both sides make it clear that they need each other in order to diversify their principal foreign policy initiatives away from Beijing, despite primary reliance on it, to send a message to Washington, and to put pressure on Seoul and Tokyo. This shared logic is not being seriously challenged in Moscow.

## **Moscow's Historical National Identity**

Russian national identity under Putin has revived ideology — despite no Marxist-Leninist quotations —, reaffirmed Soviet history in important respects, rejected the civilization of the West in favor of some sort of Eurasianism embracing neighbors of an authoritarian orientation, and insisted on Russia assuming a great power status in East Asia.<sup>23</sup>

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23. Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order*.

North Korea is a welcome object for this reconstructed identity. It poses no identity challenge — indeed, its opposition to U.S. ideology is a plus. Its history is construed as supportive of Russia's thinking about the Cold War era. The threat of a "color revolution" hangs over it, making it a sympathetic target of the cultural imperialism of the West. Finally, as a new cold war unfolds, this is one of the few states that treats Russia's "turn to the East" as positive for the balance of power.

Russians approach the Korean Peninsula with four assumptions: (1) its division is part of the legacy of 1945, which in this year of the 70th anniversary celebration is a sacred inheritance vital to national identity; (2) given the emergence of a new and enduring cold war, any resolution of the Korean nuclear crisis should be consistent with the Russian national interest in this struggle; (3) Russia's "turn to the East" is centered, above all on China, coordination with which takes precedence in the way Russia deals with North Korea; and (4) the economic future of North Korea must be inextricably linked to the development needs of the Russian Far East. These are the starting points for policy choices that depend on South Korea-Russia relations, but even more on Russia's relations with the other three great powers active in the area. North Korea's choices matter, improving or dimming Russia's possibilities, even if, as in the four decades of the Cold War, there is little that Pyongyang might do that crosses a red line for Moscow, as it jockeys with Beijing and focuses on Washington.

Russian thinking, spurred by the 70th anniversary events, showcases the danger of the revival of fascism and militarism, not of Stalinism and Maoism. Thus, no mention is made in official statements or mainstream writings of any danger from Kim Jong-un following in his father and grandfather's footsteps. Instead, a regime change in North Korea is equated with a more dangerous environment for Russia, opening the door to South Korea (whose democratic order is distrusted for being part of a U.S.-led order and supportive of "universal values" threatening to other civilizations and capable of provoking instability in Northeast Asia, especially through its pressure on North Korea. This is a matter of national interest, even more of national



identity.

North Korea has come to have symbolic importance for Russia, as for China, as one centerpiece in historical narratives about the justice of Soviet conduct in the Cold War. A contrast is drawn with the 1990s, when it serves as the poster child for an idealistic Russian foreign policy, which was duped by the United States and failed to defend Russia's national interests. The commemoration on May 9 was used as an opportunity to recommit Moscow to defend its spoils from 1945. Clearly, in future dealings related to Pyongyang, the historical dimension will be in the forefront.

Russia is reluctant to acknowledge national identity as a force in its diplomacy, but it professes a clear understanding about its national interests. In Northeast Asia, the Korean Peninsula tops the list of areas beyond Russia's borders of vital interest and where Russia has been repeatedly tested — in 1904-1905, 1945, and 1950-1953. Failure to manage the peninsula would, they assume, bring military danger right to the door of the Vladivostok. Success would establish a buffer more favorable than in Soviet times. With this logic, Russians see the military threat to North Korea as a threat shared by them, and the solution to both problems to be essentially the same. This is the message in numerous publications from the leading think tanks in Moscow and in newspaper articles, some of which have been summarized in *The Asan Forum*.<sup>24</sup>

## Russia's Geopolitical Strategy

On April 1 a *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* article asked how to maintain the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula, an indication of Russia's priority in thinking about North Korea. In it, Alexander Zhebin raised doubts about whether sanctions have been well conceived. He argued that Russia's intensification of dialogue with North Korea in 2014 was not just a result of a more active policy in the East but also a

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24. "Country Report: Russia," *The Asan Forum*, issues in 2014-2015.

recognition of the global distribution of forces and the North's support (unlike the South) for Russia, sending a representative to the Sochi Olympics and voting at the United Nations on Crimea and Ukraine. Having already agreed on a year of friendship between Russia and North Korea and on setting a program for economic cooperation, they are poised to draw closer, Zhebin argued, if Kim Jong-un attends the 70th anniversary events. Looking back, he faults earlier Russian moves as based on idealism about the United States and some of its allies (South Korea?) rather than sober calculations of Russia's national interests. Russia erred in thinking that Washington's actions would take Russia's security into account, he added, repeating the assumptions of the Soviet era about a zero-sum world order in which security trumps any other national interests. Especially mistaken, he argued, were efforts to stop development of missiles, which would leave North Korea defenseless. Depriving the North of the right to buy weapons and parts for them when South Korea and other neighbors had that right is discriminatory, Zhebin insisted. Even worse, despite protestations from Beijing and Moscow, Seoul is preparing to join the U.S.-led ballistic missile defense program. Not surprisingly, the sanctions on the North had the opposite effect, forcing it to double down on its nuclear and missile programs to compensate for a growing imbalance. Zhebin concluded that sanctions on the North are restricting the political and economic policies of Russia. This is made worse when the United States is driving its East Asian allies now to turn to anti-Russian sanctions. The conclusion is that sanctions should be lifted toward a friendly and sympathetic country, whose role over 70 years in the balance of power has supported peace and stability in the region. The alternative is to yield to plans to liquidate the DPRK, which would seriously weaken the security of Russia, readers are informed.

As Zhebin wrote in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on April 8, the six-party talks were long seen as a mechanism for forming a new system of security in Northeast Asia. He argued that the talks failed, in effect, because they became mired in the question of denuclearization instead of staying focused on this bigger objective. The long-term, Soviet

thinking about regional security first, reunification and arms control second is echoed by Zhebin. Seoul is guilty of joining Washington and Tokyo in seeking to unify the peninsula as part of a NATO of the East with a more robust ballistic missile defense network than in Europe. Obama has made clear that he is building alliances, striving for further U.S. leadership not for a regional security framework. The goal is to contain China and Russia too. Thus, Zhebin sees Asia as heading in the same direction that Europe has lately been taking.

A millennium of history should prove to Koreans that friendship with one great power against another or others does not bring peace to the peninsula or bring reunification closer. A neutral, future united Korea through guarantees from the four powers is the most acceptable variant: (1) the big four refrain from any military treaties and from stationing or sending troops there except under UN auspices; (2) Korea promises not to form any alliances as old alliances are terminated; and (3) both Koreas promise to proceed to reunification only through peaceful means, as they cut back on their arms, allowing North Korea to concentrate on its economy and South Korea to help in this endeavor. After the United States guarantees the security of the DPRK — together with China and Russia to make it more credible —, the DPRK can turn to liquidating its nuclear weapons. The article concludes by pointing the blame only at the United States and its allies for preventing the six-party talks from succeeding by striving to use this forum for an undeclared agenda to liquidate the DPRK and turn the peninsula into a fortress of the maritime powers, the United States and Japan, against the continental powers of Russia and China. In this perspective denuclearization is not the starting point but the end point of a process that begins with a regional security framework and proceeds to unification.

On April 8 *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported on the visit of Sung Kim to Moscow in the latest attempt to get agreement to reanimate the negotiations over North Korea. Failed attempts to restart the six-party talks, which are viewed as the framework for a new system of security in Northeast Asia, again raise the question why are efforts not leading to results. The article explains that the fundamental question

that needs to be resolved for the future peace regime in Northeast Asia is how will a united Korea fit into it. For Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul, a united Korea is viewed within their trilateral military-political alliance, to which Australia is now linked. The appearance of such an alliance on Russia's Far East borders is equivalent to the formation of an Asian clone of NATO, as is a closed system of American missile defense, which is much further along in Northeast Asia than in Europe. Unfortunately, Barack Obama has made clear that he is prioritizing bilateral alliances with the main aim of containing China and Russia as well, which both cannot accept. The article asks, look at what is occurring now in Europe, and how could you want the same in Asia? The Korean Peninsula looms high in geopolitics in Asia.

In the May 12 issue of *The Korea Herald* there was a report on China and Russia again seeking the resumption of the six-party talks.<sup>25</sup> Other states are reluctant in large part because they recognize that the new talks, after a hiatus of seven years or longer, would be fundamentally different from the old ones. Not only would North Korea concentrate on winning recognition as a nuclear power, but China and, especially Russia, would be insistent on turning the talks into a platform for replacing U.S.-led alliances with some regional security architecture, supposedly as the reassurance needed to secure North Korea's trust and cooperation. Russian geopolitical reasoning is now in the forefront.

Russia's priorities for North Korea are: (1) the cornerstone of a regional security framework centered on the 5th working group of the six-party talks, replacing the U.S. alliance system with guarantees from the major powers of the North's security and exclusion from alliances; (2) the energy and transportation corridor for a new, regional economic architecture, in which international assistance makes the North's economy a locomotive for the region; and (3) the confident

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25. "China, Russia Reaffirm Efforts to Resume N. Korea Nuclear Talks," *The Korea Herald*, May 12, 2015. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150512000690> (date accessed: May 13, 2015).

participant in delayed denuclearization as a consequence of the first two transformations. Moreover, as preconditions for reunification of the peninsula, Russians also place demands on South Korea: (1) the partner in replacing its current security approach, removing U.S. bases and troops and accepting guarantees from the major powers of its security that eliminate the prospects of any new alliance; (2) the main source of funding for the economic revival of North Korea through regional as well as inter-Korean linkages; and (3) the fundamentally changed supporter of accepting North Korea without pressure for democratization or human rights. Russia's focus, arguably, is more on changing South Korea than North Korea, prioritizing security first, second economics, third denuclearization, and last human rights. These goals inform its thinking about the approaches of each of the major actors in peninsular affairs.

Russia's myth of multipolarity was increasingly exposed in 2014-2015. Earlier talk of a separate pole or more in Europe had disappeared even before the Ukraine crisis. An emphasis on Japan was vanishing even before the anticipated Putin visit to Tokyo was first postponed and then dropped from sight in 2015. When Park Geun-hye did not attend the 70th anniversary ceremony on May 9, South Korea lost relevance, but when Kim Jong-un cancelled his visit there was still hope that North Korea could be helpful in salvaging Russia's leverage in the region. While talk of India as a pole has lingered and some vague notion of ASEAN as a pole is repeated, Russia's pivot to China is what is really left standing, as Xi Jinping prepared to be the host of his own 70th gala that would display China's much greater regional centrality. Russia can proceed with its North Korea gambit, but it is unlikely to do so apart from China.

The only explanation for the April 2015 announcement of an agreement on joint efforts on outer space could easily be interpreted as a Russian warning in support of military cooperation, despite claims that this would be for peaceful uses. After all, Pyongyang is in the habit of clothing its long-range missile launches in the language of satellite launches. This is one example of Russia's growing resort

to intimidation in order to pressure Seoul into policies it desires, as it leans closer to Pyongyang.

### **Geo-economic Development Plans for the Russian Far East**

Russia has approved many programs for the development of the Russian Far East, each aimed at reducing its dependence on natural resource exports and attracting investments from foreign companies. Repeatedly, there has been talk of cooperation with South Korea and Japan in order to make these plans successful. Accompanying these proposals there have been administrative reorganization and suggestions for modernization reforms, but the fundamental problems of the area remain. Only China has persevered enough to take a big stake in cross-border agreements and trade with the area (without much investment) as others have kept trying without a lot to show for it. Yet, reservations remain about how much to open Siberia and the Russian Far East to Chinese investment in energy (until recently restrictions were tighter than for others) and how much Chinese labor should be permitted into the area. In light of Russian restrictions and Chinese hesitation to invest in the areas where Russia is seeking capital, a fallback position is to focus on North Korea as a way out of Russia's dilemma. This is not a naive hope for bustling reform in North Korea, but a calculated strategy for infrastructure development in a country still loathe to opening up. South Korea's industrial parks do little for Russia. China's extraction of minerals and consumer goods trade also do little for it. A multilateral settlement with a suspicious Pyongyang willing to relax controls only to the extent that its territory would be used as a corridor and some of the energy and funds would flow to it is Russia's goal.

Incentives have not brought the bountiful results for the Russian Far East that Russians for more than two decades insisted were within reach and then complained were being denied.<sup>26</sup> Japan and South

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26. Gilbert Rozman, "The Crisis of the Russian Far East: Who Is to Blame?"

Korea as well as the United States did not invest nearly as much as had once been anticipated. China has shown considerable interest, but much less willingness to invest. President Medvedev's modernization thinking never became the basis of policy, and the huge sums spent on the Vladivostok APEC summit in 2012 were just one more Potemkin village in a country awash in oil and gas money. That leaves as the way forward without ceding the area to Chinese capital and labor a long-discussed scheme of north-south corridors, respectful of Russia's nuclear superpower status so it will not be ignored, welcoming to its energy superpower status in recognition of both North Korea's needs and the region's closest supplies, and attentive to a transportation partner able to realize its Eurasian identity as the natural bridge between two oceans.

The Rason-Khasan railroad, planned as early as 2001, is now transporting Russian coal to a North Korean port, from which it is shipped to South Korea. The volume of shipments remains too low to recoup expenses, but Russian hopes are high that the expansion of economic ties will lead to an increase in mutual trust, conducive to stability in North-South relations (i.e., the North toning down its bellicose language and the South becoming more generous in its developmental assistance) and later to progress on questions of security. This confidence-building and crisis-resolving sequence is duplicitous, since the outcome Russia seeks in economic transformation and security as well as reunification is a stronger North able to oblige the South to accept the North's terms for reconciliation and a regional order as well as a regional approach to values opposed to Seoul's intentions. Economic projects presented as in line with globalization are really targeted at a new global order opposed to what has been championed with "Global Korea." Indeed, the Eurasian Initiative is perceived to be an approach that outsources to Russia economic projects to revive North Korea in a manner Russia desires, regardless of

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*Problems of Post-Communism* 44, no. 5 (1997), pp. 3-12; Gilbert Rozman, "Strategic Thinking about the Russian Far East: A Resurgent Russia Eyes Its Future in Northeast Asia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 55, no. 1 (2008), pp. 36-48.

the intentions of South Korean officials.

Russia, along with China, views geo-economics increasingly through the prism of megaprojects, centering on transportation arteries and energy pipelines. China's projects are largely east-west, ambitiously connecting the various regions of Asia and even Asia and Europe. Russia's east-west projects to countries in the EU have encountered strong resistance and its east-west blueprint for the EEC remains hard to decipher with little prospect of funding in the near future, but it is doubling down on its north-south projects through the Korean Peninsula as the focus of diplomacy in Northeast Asia. Talks with Japan, which were promoted in 2013-2014, are moribund for now, and talks with South Korea on its direct role in the Russian Far East or even its NAPCI proposal draw scant interest. Rather, Russia shows interest in its Eurasian Initiative primarily as a rubric for realizing its own north-south agenda, sharply at odds with Park Geun-hye's conditional "trustpolitik." While Obama firmly opposes *byungjin* and Park looks at it skeptically without steps toward reconciliation, Putin essentially embraces *byungjin* as a transitional approach. In this respect, he puts less weight on economic reform and denuclearization than Xi Jinping has of late. He also is more impatient for Park to improve ties with Kim Jong-un, since it is assumed that the Russian Far East would be a principal beneficiary — parallel corridors would be constructed east-west to Shinuiju and on to Northeast China and north-south to Rason and on to the Russian Far East with South Korean development assistance in the lead, the latter becoming one of Russia's major links to the Asia-Pacific region.

## **Conclusion**

Some in Russia and South Korea consider Russia's increased engagement with North Korea benign and even promising. If others cannot convince the North to agree to denuclearize, Russia's more sympathetic approach is worth trying, since it is seen as committed to this goal. If others are hesitant about economic overtures to North Korea,



as debates about shifting in that direction gain momentum, Russia has taken the lead. In 2015 no country appears to be as confident as Russia that it knows how to change the calculus in Pyongyang, according to its current self-serving narrative. The fact that South Korea disagrees is taken as evidence it prefers regime change.

Russia seeks regime change in South Korea (a progressive agenda generously to assist North Korea's development and distance the country from the United States), not North Korea. It champions reunification, but along lines favored by the North (no democracy, preservation of the North's political elite in power, an end to the U.S. alliance). Rather than economic integration centered on South Korean investment in the Russian Far East or North Korea removing barriers to market forces, Russians focus on the revival of North Korea's economy through big, state-centered projects.

Russians insist that their country is the most supportive of Korean reunification. It would benefit most economically. It is least interested in gaining dominance over the North or in using a unified Korea for regional dominance. Moreover, Russia is the country least interested in imposing its own values. Arguing that the reason the six-party talks have failed and Pyongyang has gone further along the path of missile and nuclear weapons development is because the overall security framework in the region has been left to fester and worsen, Russian specialists find the answer in new security assurances to Pyongyang and a new regional security architecture. Just as NATO and U.S. hegemonism are the reputed cause of destabilization in Europe, the trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK alliances are blamed for Pyongyang's defensive measures and for obliging Russia as well as China to take defensive measures of their own. It is not North Korea's missile threat that is leading to a ballistic missile defense system under U.S. leadership, but that system that is driving the North to increase its arms at the same time as it is driving China and Russia toward a continental regrouping, in which North Korea's inclusion is more seriously contemplated. The maritime alliances and partnerships that are turning into a "NATO of the East" are blamed for blocking denuclearization, reunification, and, above all, peace in Northeast Asia.

While some argue that preventing *byungjin* and securing a clear commitment to denuclearization are necessary for the resumption of the six-party talks, among those who disagree, including the mainstream in Russia, one finds justification in a different set of assumptions about how to get denuclearization. Behind these views, however, is usually a lower priority for denuclearization and aspirations to convert the six-party talks into a broader set of negotiations over the regional order and the type of reunification that is desired. Russia is taking the lead in using North Korea as a means to pursue goals other than denuclearization. Its diplomacy has shifted from Seoul and also Tokyo, increasingly sources of disappointment, to Pyongyang, a pawn in Russia's "turn to Asia," playing a weak hand and harboring deep hostility to the United States and its allies. Settling on unfavorable trends in regional security and the threat from U.S.-led alliances and pressure over values as the explanation for the North's recalcitrance, Moscow has projected its own grievances onto the peninsula and associated its cause for countering the United States with Pyongyang's struggle. It simplifies the argument by ignoring any negative behavior of the North Korean government, by dismissing any intentions by it to maintain nuclear weapons after the regional security situation is resolved, and by assuming that it is amenable to reunification without attempting regime change in South Korea. Russian arguments are as simplistic and self-serving as were Soviet arguments during the Cold War.

Kim Jong-un has not agreed to Putin's strategy even if it is more appealing than Xi's. His decision to not travel to Moscow for the May 9 celebrations may be a result of internal factors or to concern that his presence would be overshadowed by the presence of other leaders and the combined pressure of Putin and Xi, but it also may be linked to disappointment that Putin is unwilling to further his own strategy for more armaments or would have to backtrack if the visit were followed by missile tests and, perhaps coinciding with the 70th anniversary date the North celebrates on August 15 or the 70th anniversary of the ruling party on October 10, a nuclear test. There is no reason to anticipate a change of course by Moscow due to Kim's

absence. As, in the case of Beijing, it has a long-term strategy, awaiting Pyongyang's decision. Kim still finds Moscow welcoming as he considers the triangle with Beijing as well.

What has shifted for Moscow in 2014, as in Beijing in 2009, is the framework used for interpreting developments related to North Korea. In this 70th anniversary year North Korea is perceived in a broad historical context; the spoils of war and the sacrifices of Cold War support now overshadow the promise of regional amity. The historical dimension of national identity is in the forefront, not just because of the way Ukraine and Japan are being depicted. The civilizational factor is accentuated too, as Washington and its allies are seen as threatening another "color revolution" through regime change in North Korea. Not least of all, the international relations dimension of hegemonism and the U.S.-centered international order looms large in reasoning that makes North Korea the ultimate barrier to NATO of the East edging close to what was long seen as China's industrial heartland and what is nervously seen as Russia's fragile foothold on the Pacific. National identity may have earlier been concealed in arguments about North Korea steeped in claims of international responsibility or, at more candid moments, of national interests. While the debate continues in China, leaving some uncertainty about how much national identity has gained primacy, the debate is settled in Russia amid insistence on a new cold war.

One factor giving hope to Russia is that progressives could return to power in Seoul more amenable to *byungjin* and opposed to U.S. policies toward North Korea. They may start with a different historical perspective, more sympathetic to the plight of North Korea and to Russia as a partner offering hope for a third way without the United States or China gaining dominance and forcing South Korea into one-sided dependence. Encouraged in this manner, Russians feel more emboldened to apply pressure on the Park administration and lead the way in incentives to Kim Jong-un.

Russia is increasingly encouraging North Korea and pressuring South Korea with the implicit threat of tilting further to the North if recent policy, such as Park Geun-hye's snubbing of Putin's invitations,

is not changed. While the North Koreans are playing Moscow off against Beijing, the old “northern triangle” is more complicated than that. Russia’s “turn to China” and Pyongyang’s need for Beijing are likely to put Beijing in the driver’s seat in the next stages of diplomatic maneuvers. This outcome may not have been welcomed by Russia when it was more confident of its economic clout and more hopeful about its multipolar diplomacy with Japan or even South Korea, but now that it sees the world through the lens of a new cold war, making common cause with China in opposition to the United States and its allies is a desirable outcome. Many in Northeast Asia are slow to awaken to this new reality.

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