

## **Russia, China and the Korean Peninsula: A Post-Ukraine Assessment**

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The paper deals with Russia's policies toward the Korean Peninsula in the post-Ukraine strategic environment. The article begins with the analysis of how Russia is drawing closer to China due to its ongoing confrontation with the West and the Ukraine crisis. The article then reviews three distinctive periods in Russian post-Cold War strategy toward the Koreas: the 1990s; the 2000s and the early 2010s; and 2014 onward. The author argues that Russia's current policies toward the Peninsula are being increasingly driven by anti-Americanism and the rising dependence on China. Russia's ties with the North are experiencing a renaissance, while the relations with the South have soured. Russia's growing deference to China's interests in East Asia will result in Moscow closely aligning with Beijing on the Korean Peninsula issues. In case of a North Korean contingency, this may lead to a Sino-Russian coordinated intervention in the North.

**Keywords:** Korean Peninsula, Russia, China, the Ukraine crisis, Northeast Asian security

### **Introduction**

The paper deals with Russia's policies toward the Korean Peninsula in the post-Ukraine strategic environment. The article begins with the analysis of how Russia is drawing closer to China due to its ongoing confrontation with the West and the Ukraine crisis. The article then reviews three distinctive periods in Russian post-Cold War strategy toward the Koreas: the 1990s; the 2000s and the early 2010s; and 2014 onward. The author argues that Russia's current policies toward the Peninsula are being increasingly driven by anti-Americanism and the rising dependence on China. Russia's ties with the North are experi-

encing a renaissance, while relations with the South, a U.S. ally, have soured. Russia's growing deference to China's interests in East Asia is likely to result in Moscow closely aligning with China on the Peninsula issues and playing second fiddle to Beijing. In case of a North Korean contingency, this may lead to a Sino-Russian coordinated intervention in the North, a scenario under which Seoul's chances to achieve unification on its own terms are reduced to near zero.

### **Sino-Russian Relationship: From a Strategic Partnership to a Quasi-alliance**

The Russian-Chinese strategic partnership has been assessed in a variety of ways since its inception in the second half of the 1990s. Until recently, the dominant view in the West was that it is "an inherently limited partnership," or "an axis of convenience," which is unbalanced and shaky due to cultural barriers and the two countries' significantly divergent interests that are likely to diverge even more in the future.<sup>1</sup> Any idea of upgrading the partnership to the level of alliance has been rejected as unrealistic.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning, however, there was also a dissenting view that saw Russian-Chinese collaboration as something much more durable and having a great potential for further development. In 2001, Ariel Cohen characterized it as an "emerging alliance" that would require careful monitoring, predicting that "the degree to which the Sino-Russian alliance may become anti-Western in future depends on how deeply the two Eurasian powers feel that the United States threatens their interests."<sup>3</sup> In an article published in 2008,

Thomas Wilkins concludes that the Moscow-Beijing partnership is "a highly efficacious vehicle for coordinating Russo-Chinese-SCO security policy. Those who doubt its capacities and durability may be in for a shock as it increasingly exercises dominance in Central Asia and begins to wield powerful influence on the global stage."<sup>4</sup>

The latter view, emphasizing the potency of Russian-Chinese collaboration, appears to be supported by developments since 2012, and especially in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, which amounts to a steady increase in the depth and scope of the bilateral relationship. It may not yet be accurate to describe the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership as an alliance, but the relationship is certainly growing stronger. Indeed, the Russian-Chinese partnership, as it stands today, looks more solid and efficient than some of Washington's "treaty alliances" such as the one with Thailand.

The Ukraine crisis, which started to develop in the fall of 2013, consolidated the Moscow-Beijing axis. Beijing refused to join the Washington-led campaign to ostracize Moscow and displayed benevolent neutrality regarding Russian moves in Crimea and Ukraine. Vladimir Putin's visits to Shanghai (May 2014) and Beijing (November 2014, September 2015), Xi Jinping's trip to Moscow (May 2015), and many other high-level Russia-China meetings since the beginning of the Ukraine trouble, underscored the growing closeness between the two great powers. In October 2014, during a meeting with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, Putin declared that Russia and China were "natural partners and natural allies," using the word "ally" for the first time with respect to Beijing.<sup>5</sup>

Russia and China concluded a host of agreements, substantially

1. Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2008). See also Stephen Kotkin, "The Unbalanced Triangle," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 5 (September-October 2009), pp. 130-138.  
2. See, for example, Natasha Kuhrt, "Russia and China: Strategic Partnership or Asymmetrical Dependence?" in *Russia and East Asia: Informal and Gradual Integration*, Tsuneo Akaha and Anna Vassilieva, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 91-107.

3. Ariel Cohen, "The Russia-China Friendship and Cooperation Treaty: A Strategic Shift in Eurasia?" (The Heritage Foundation, July 18, 2001), <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2001/07/the-russia-china-friendship-and-cooperation-treaty>.  
4. Thomas Wilkins, "Russo-Chinese Strategic Partnership: A New Form of Security Cooperation?" *Contemporary Security Policy* 29, no. 2 (2008), p. 378.  
5. "Putin Confirms Plans to Meet Chinese President During APEC Summit in Beijing," RIA Novosti, October 14, 2014.

expanding and deepening bilateral cooperation in energy, finance, and high-tech and other sectors. The biggest among them was a 30-year contract of USD 400 billion to supply natural gas from Eastern Siberia to northeastern China signed in May 2014. This was followed, in November 2014 and September 2015, by framework agreements that would allow China to receive pipeline gas from Western Siberia and Sakhalin Island. At the same time, China's imports of Russian oil skyrocketed by nearly 40 percent in 2014, displacing other suppliers' share of the Chinese import market, such as Saudi Arabia.<sup>6</sup>

The central banks of the two countries signed a currency swap agreement worth 150 billion yuan (around USD 25 billion), enabling Russia to draw on yuan in case of need, and Beijing officials announced China was willing to help the Russian economy.<sup>7</sup> As leading Western agencies downgraded Russia's ratings to junk or near-junk level, the Chinese credit rating agency Dagong Global gave Russia's Gazprom the highest AAA rating, which would enable the Russian energy giant to place shares in Hong Kong.<sup>8</sup> While Western financial institutions drastically cut their lending to Russian businesses, Chinese banks were expanding their presence in Russia, with many of the loans denominated in yuan.<sup>9</sup> Another sign of growing collaboration in finance was the growing share of Russia-China trade conducted in

their national currencies (mostly yuan), rather than the U.S. dollars. By May 2015, this share grew to seven percent, compared to almost zero only a few years before.<sup>10</sup>

Russia has traditionally been wary of any Chinese presence in its Far East, which shares a 4,000-kilometer border with China. However, over 2014 and 2015, Moscow lifted tacit restrictions on Chinese investments and began to actively court Chinese capital. In a landmark move, the Russian government agreed to sell stakes in the country's most lucrative oil field and the world's third biggest copper field, both located in Eastern Siberia to Chinese companies.<sup>11</sup> Russia and China began construction of a railway bridge, the first ever permanent link between the two countries across the Amur River that will connect the Russian Far East's hinterland to China's Heilongjiang province. Russian and Chinese companies also agreed to jointly develop the port of Zarubino, strategically located at the junction of the Russian, Chinese, and North Korean borders. The port will provide China's landlocked provinces of Jilin and Heilongjiang with direct access to the East Sea.

There are areas where Russia and China have competing interests, particularly Central Asia, where China's growing economic presence has long worried Russia. However, since 2014, Moscow has become more accommodating toward China there. In May 2015, Putin and Xi agreed to coordinate their flagship economic initiatives in Central Asia, the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). In their joint declaration, the parties expressed willingness "to make coordinated efforts toward the integration of constructing EEU and SREB," with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) serving as the main platform for linking up the two initiatives. The document also mentions "a long-term goal of progressing toward a free trade zone between EEU and

6. Russia, Kremlin, "Press Statements Following Russian-Chinese Talks," May 8, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/49433>; "Russia, OPEC Jostle to Meet China Oil Demand," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 23, 2015.

7. "Russia May Seek China Help to Deal with Crisis," *The South China Morning Post*, December 18, 2014. See also, "Beijing Ready to Help Russia's Rattled Economy, Chinese Foreign Minister Says," *The South China Morning Post*, December 22, 2014.

8. Jerin Mathew, "China's Dagong Undermines Western Sanctions on Russia, Rates Gazprom's Debt at Top AAA," *International Business Times*, February 2, 2015.

9. "To Mutual Benefit of the Parties" (in Russian), *Kommersant*, June 4, 2015; Alexander Gabuev, "Smiles and Waves: What Xi Jinping Took Away from Moscow," (Carnegie Moscow Center, May 29, 2015), <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=60248>.

10. Russia, Kremlin, "Press Statements Following Russian-Chinese Talks."

11. Alexei Lossan, "Rosneft to Sell 10 Percent Stake in Largest Oil Field to Chinese Company," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, September 8, 2014; "Russia, China to Jointly Develop Udokan Copper Field in Transbaikalia," ITAR-TASS, May 20, 2014.

China.”<sup>12</sup>

On the political-military front, Russia and China have been increasing the frequency and scale of their joint drills. In May 2015, in a move fraught with symbolism, they conducted their first naval exercise in the Mediterranean, NATO’s maritime backyard. Perhaps even more importantly, Russia, in a departure from its previous policies, appears ready to sell China its most advanced weapons platforms, such as S-400 surface-to-air missile systems and Su-35 fighter jets.<sup>13</sup>

As Gilbert Rozman points out, Beijing finds itself in a more competitive relationship with Washington and its allies, making Russia “an irreplaceable partner” in balancing against the United States.<sup>14</sup> In recent years, calls have risen in China to upgrade the partnership with Russia to a full-scale alliance.<sup>15</sup> Some news outlets have posited that Beijing and Moscow are already “allies” without an alliance treaty,<sup>16</sup> while a growing number of Chinese experts characterize the relationship as a “quasi-alliance.”<sup>17</sup> China’s first blue book on national

12. Russia, Kremlin, “Joint Declaration by the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the Coordination of the Construction of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt,” May 8, 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4971>.
13. Catherine Putz, “Sold: Russian S-400 Missile Defense Systems to China,” *The Diplomat*, April 14, 2015; Nikolai Novichkov and James Hardy, “Russia Ready to Supply ‘Standard’ Su-35s to China, says Official,” *HIS Jane’s 360*, November 25, 2014.
14. Gilbert Rozman, “Chinese Views of Sino-Russian Relations and the U.S. Pivot,” *Uneasy Triangle: China, Russia and the United States in the New Global Order* (Washington, D.C.: The Center on Global Interests, October 2015), p. 20.
15. For Chinese views arguing in favor of the alliance with Russia, see, for example, Yan Xuetong, “The Weakening of the Unipolar Configuration,” in *China 3.0*, Mark Leonard (ed.) (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, November 2012), [http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR66\\_CHINA\\_30\\_final.pdf](http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR66_CHINA_30_final.pdf), pp. 112-119. See also “U.S. Actions Make China-Russia Alliance Appealing,” *Global Times*, January 20, 2012; Dai Xu, “China and Russia should Forge a Eurasian Alliance” (in Russian), *People’s Daily* (Russian-language edition), January 30, 2012.
16. Mu Chunshan, “Why Doesn’t Russia Support China in the South China Sea?” *The Diplomat*, June 21, 2014.
17. See, for example, Zhang Wenzong, Xue Wei, Li Xuegang, and Zhang Shenshen, “Analysis of the Strategic Influence of the Ukraine Crisis,” *Contemporary International Relations* 25, no. 1 (January/February 2015), pp. 75-91.

security, commissioned by the government and written by scholars of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, states that China should consider forming an “alliance with Russia.”<sup>18</sup>

As Dmitri Trenin notes, the Russia-China bond “is solid, for it is based on fundamental national interests regarding the world order as both the Russian and Chinese governments would prefer to see it.”<sup>19</sup> Moscow is not inimical to China’s rise as a great power since this creates economic and political alternatives for Russia other than the West. The consensus in the Russian ruling elite is that, in the foreseeable future, China will not pose a threat to Russia and can be a reliable partner. General (retired) Leonid Reshetnikov, who heads the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (Kremlin’s foreign policy think-tank) describes the situation as follows:

We are closely following the situation in China. Of course, this is a big country, where different factions exist, including expansionist ones. But we are confident that China is interested in good relations with Russia. China’s main rival is the United States, not Russia. Therefore, China needs a well-protected and quiet rear area. For the next 30-40 years, Russia is unlikely to face any threat from China. Beijing is doing its best to avoid whatever might cause Russia’s irritation and negative reaction. A serious conflict between Russia and China is possible only if grave mistakes are made by us or by the Chinese, or else if the American agents do a good job in China. The Western countries are keen to set Russia and China against each other. They keep forcing on us this China threat notion. Yet we will never buy that.<sup>20</sup>

Viewing themselves as great powers, both Moscow and Beijing loathe the idea of a systemic hegemon that dictates and adjudicates global rules, particularly considering that Russia remembers itself as having

18. “Terrorism Surging in China: Blue Paper,” *Beijing News*, May 7, 2014.
19. Dmitri Trenin, “Russia and the Rise of Asia” (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, November 2013), p. 6, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP\\_Trenin\\_Engl\\_Asia2013.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Trenin_Engl_Asia2013.pdf).
20. Remarks by Leonid Reshetnikov, Director, Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, Roundtable at Far Eastern Federal University, Vladivostok, February 2014 (author’s personal notes).

been a superpower while China preserves memories of Middle Kingdom glory. From the balance-of-power perspective, it is only natural that two lesser poles should join forces against the preponderant player. At the regional level of geopolitics, U.S. hegemony prevents Russia and China from enjoying a comfortable margin of security, if not dominance, in what they regard as their rightful domains. For Russia, this is the post-Soviet space; for China, East Asia. Moscow and Beijing see Washington's policies, such as its support for a pro-Western Ukraine and the "rebalancing" in the Pacific, as aimed at direct containment of, respectively, Russia and China.

In order to counterbalance the United States on the global stage, Russia and China coordinate their steps in the world governing bodies, particularly the United Nations Security Council, and promote new institutions, such as the BRICS and its New Development Bank, designed to serve as alternatives to the Western-dominated international order. In their common regional neighborhood, Moscow and Beijing aim for what may be dubbed "Eurasian continentalism." What they envision would be based on the newly expanded Shanghai Cooperation Organization and, possibly, on the recently reinvigorated Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). These are organizations in which Beijing and Moscow play prominent parts and the United States is conspicuously absent. China and Russia seek to act as the principal co-leaders and shapers of the new economic and security architecture of continental Eurasia, perhaps with inputs from Delhi, Islamabad, and Tehran, while collaborating to exclude the United States. Finally, Moscow and Beijing seem ready to provide tacit diplomatic support to each other in the event of conflicts with their neighbors in Eastern Europe and East Asia, respectively. That means, for example, that China takes a position of benevolent neutrality regarding Russia's actions on Ukraine, while Moscow looks the other way when Beijing pushes its claims in the South China Sea.<sup>21</sup>

21. For example, Russia's head representative at the *Shangri La Dialogue* on Asian security, Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov, did not even mention

Moscow and Beijing also share an interest in guarding their state-centric autocratic political systems against what they perceive as Western subversion. As the Director of the Russian Studies Institute at China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations Feng Yujun emphasizes, Russia and China grow "increasingly close in their concepts of political governance" and the two countries "have a greater stake in mutual support to counter political pressure from the West."<sup>22</sup>

This convergence of basic interests constitutes the foundation for a strategic partnership. The existence of a common foe — the United States — may be transforming the partnership into an entente or perhaps an alliance.<sup>23</sup> A joint report by Russian and Chinese scholars sees "elements of a military-political alliance," albeit not legally binding, emerging between the two countries.<sup>24</sup> The report argues that, "if need be, the ties can be converted into an alliance relationship without long preparations."<sup>25</sup>

Since a hot war between contemporary great powers is becoming more and more unthinkable due to the enormous destructive force of nuclear warheads and other modern arms, warfare is migrating into

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the SCS controversy. See, "Main Points of Speech by Deputy Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation Dr. Anatoly Antonov at the 14th Asia Security Summit 'The Shangri-La Dialogue'," Singapore, May 30, 2015, <http://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri-la-dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2015-862b/special-sessions-315c/antonov-da7d>.

22. Feng Yujun, "Reflections on the Strengthening of Sino-Russian Relations of Comprehensive Strategic Interaction and Partnership against the Background of High Turbulence in International Relations," (in Russian) in *Rossiysko-Kitayskiye Otnosheniya: Sostoyaniye i Perspektivy Razvitiya* [Russia-China Relations; the present state and the prospects for further development], Konstantin Kokorev and Boris Volkhonsky (eds.) (Moscow: Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, 2014), pp. 51-53.

23. Dmitri Trenin, "From Greater Europe to Greater Asia: The Sino-Russian Entente" (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, April 2015), [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP\\_Trenin\\_To\\_Asia\\_WEB\\_2015Eng.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Trenin_To_Asia_WEB_2015Eng.pdf).

24. Igor Ivanov, ed., *Rossiysko-Kitayskiy Dialog: Model' 2015* [Russia-China Dialogue: 2015 Model] (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, 2015), p. 6.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

the domain of trade and finance. In the twenty-first century, economic sanctions are becoming weapons of choice in the conflicts between major powers. This is what Russia, penalized by the West, has amply experienced in the Ukraine crisis. And this is what China may face, if and when it clashes with the United States. Thus, mutual geo-economic support becomes crucial for Moscow and Beijing. The bond with China will give Russia a considerable degree of economic independence from the sanctions-prone West, providing an alternative source of finance and capital goods. In return, China will enjoy secure overland access to Russia's vast reserves of natural resources, especially oil and gas, so that its voracious economy can continue functioning even in the event of a U.S.-imposed naval blockade.<sup>26</sup> Chinese strategists seem to take this scenario quite seriously.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the growing closeness, Russo-Chinese relationship is not free of distrust and residual fears. Russia, as a weaker party in the dyad, feels somewhat uneasy about its increasing dependence on China, particularly in the economic dimension. Russia's biggest concern about China, albeit Russian officials nowadays avoid discussing it publicly, is that Beijing may at some point in the future claim back the Russian Far East whose southern part was under the Qing's nominal sovereignty until the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> That said, absent changes in the countries' autocratic political regimes, and

26. Judging from the debate among U.S. security specialists, economic strangulation of China by means of a naval blockade may be emerging as the optimal strategy for dealing with China in a major conflict. See, for example, Sean Mirski, "Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013), pp. 10-11. See also, T. X. Hammes, "Offshore Control is the Answer," (U.S. Naval Institute, December 2012), <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2012-12/offshore-control-answer>.

27. Andrew Erickson and Gabriel Collins, "China's Oil Security Pipe Dream," *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 2 (Spring 2010), p. 90. See also, Kenji Horiuchi, "Russia and Energy Cooperation in East Asia," in *Russia and East Asia: Informal and Gradual Integration*, Tsuneo Akaha and Anna Vassilieva (eds.), p. 165.

28. Rensselaer Lee and Artyom Lukin, *Russia's Far East: New Dynamics in Asia Pacific and Beyond* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2015).

with the United States being viewed as the principal foe by both Moscow and Beijing, the Sino-Russian axis is likely to grow stronger.

### Evolution of Russia's Korean Peninsula Policies and the China Factor

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia's stance on the geopolitics of the Korean Peninsula has changed several times. In broad strokes, three periods can be identified in Russia's relations with the Koreans.

#### 1990s: Abandoning Pyongyang for Seoul

Since the division of the Korean Peninsula into two hostile political entities, Moscow had recognized the North as the only legitimate Korean state and maintained alliance with it while treating the South as only a "territory" and a U.S. "puppet" rather than a sovereign state. That said, in the early 1980s, the Soviet leadership had to acknowledge that the DPRK had started to lag behind the ROK in economic development. Moscow began to view Seoul as a potential economic partner, especially with regard to the Russian Far East. In political terms, Kremlin began to give consideration to the fact that the ROK could have its own foreign policy interests, not identical or subordinate to those of the United States.<sup>29</sup> However, the downing of a KAL passenger jet in the Soviet airspace in late August 1983 ruled out any possibility for an early rapprochement between Moscow and Seoul. Instead, the final major spike in the Cold War tensions between the USSR and the United States, which occurred in the first half of the 1980s, led to the strengthening of Soviet-North Korean ties, with Kim Il-sung visiting Moscow twice, in 1984 and 1986. The summits with the Soviet leaders secured Pyongyang a significant amount of Soviet

29. Vasily Mikheev, "Russian Strategic Thinking toward North and South Korea," in *Russian Strategic Thought toward Asia*, Gilbert Rozman, Kazuhiko Togo and Joseph P. Ferguson (eds.) (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 188.

military assistance as well as a commitment to help North Korea develop its civilian nuclear program. Yet by the late 1980s, relations between Moscow and Pyongyang began to deteriorate, largely due to North Korean displeasure over Gorbachev's reforms and Soviet worries about the growing risks of nuclear proliferation activities by the DPRK.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Moscow rapidly moved toward normalization of diplomatic relations with Seoul. The Soviet Union took part in the 1988 Seoul Olympics. In 1990, Gorbachev had a meeting with the ROK President Roh Tae-woo in San Francisco that resulted in the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries the same year. Seoul's agreement to give cash-strapped Moscow USD 3 billion in loans, with pledges of further economic cooperation, played an important role in Kremlin's decision to recognize the South even at the price of offending Pyongyang.

The final collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence in Moscow of Boris Yeltsin's administration that avowed principles of liberal democracy and saw Russia as a close partner of the West dealt a huge blow to Russian-North Korean relations. In the first half of the 1990s, the newly democratic Russia essentially abandoned its long-time ally, the DPRK, and shifted priority to the ROK. In November 1992, Yeltsin and Roh Tae-woo held a summit in Seoul, signing a framework treaty on the basic principles of bilateral relations. In June 1994, President Kim Young-sam visited Moscow. Commercial exchanges registered rapid expansion, mostly thanks to the influx of South Korean consumer products into the Russian market. The two sides even discussed the sales of Russian military hardware to the ROK. At the same time, economic and military ties between Russia and the North dropped to almost zero. Moscow saw the DPRK as a totalitarian pariah state with no future. Many decisionmakers in Moscow believed that North Korea was close to collapse and had nothing against the absorption of the DPRK by the ROK on South Korean terms. An additional factor in Kremlin's unfriendliness toward the DPRK was

30. Mikheev, "Russian Strategic Thinking toward North and South Korea," pp. 191-192.

the fact that Pyongyang maintained active ties with the communist opposition to the Yeltsin regime.<sup>31</sup>

Until the mid-1990s, Moscow's policies on the Korean Peninsula issues aligned with — or, to put it more accurately, followed — those of Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo. This was due to several factors, such as Russia's desire to act on the international stage in agreement with the West, its preoccupation with multiple domestic crises, and hopes to get material benefits from South Korea in the form of preferential loans, investments, and technologies.

During the North Korean nuclear crisis of 1993-1994, Russia mostly was a passive observer, effectively siding with the United States and even supporting the U.S. threat of imposing UN sanctions against the DPRK.<sup>32</sup> In 1995, Moscow formally notified Pyongyang that the alliance treaty of 1961 committing the USSR to the defense of the DPRK had become obsolete and needed to be replaced with another treaty not containing a mutual defense clause.<sup>33</sup>

However, by the second half of the 1990s, concerns were increasingly raised in Moscow that the heavy tilt toward Seoul at the expense of Pyongyang only served to undermine Russia's positions in Northeast Asia without giving it any tangible benefits. Moscow was getting unhappy with the fact that the four-party group, consisting of the DPRK, the ROK, the United States, and China, was emerging as the main mechanism to deal with the Korean Peninsula issues — with Russia being left out. Moscow also felt that Seoul showed less interest in Russia after it had scaled down its ties with the North. Russia's new Foreign Minister Evgeny Primakov, who in 1996 replaced the

31. Vasily Mikheev, "Russian Policy towards the Korean Peninsula after Yeltsin's Reelection as President," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 11, no. 2 (1997), pp. 348-77.

32. Georgy Toloraya, "Korean Peninsula and Russia: the problems of interaction" (in Russian), *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn'* [International Affairs], November 2002, [http://world.lib.ru/k/kim\\_o\\_i/a9616.shtml](http://world.lib.ru/k/kim_o_i/a9616.shtml).

33. Final Report on the Project "Russia-Korea relations in the Architecture of Northeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific" (Gorbachev Foundation, February 2003), [http://www.gorby.ru/activity/conference/show\\_70/view\\_13120/](http://www.gorby.ru/activity/conference/show_70/view_13120/).

pro-Western Andrei Kozyrev, made efforts to correct the policy with the aim of mending relations with Pyongyang and raising Russia's profile in Korean affairs. However, Moscow's hand was still too weak to make any noticeable impact on the Peninsula's strategic equation.

### **2000-2013: Striving for an Independent Role and Multipolar Equilibrium**

With Vladimir Putin's coming to power in 2000 and Russia's recovery from the chaos of the 1990s, Moscow had more resources — and more political will — to pursue pro-active and independent foreign policies. Besides, by the late 1990s, the divergence of views on some key issues between Russia and the West became obvious. Russia now felt much less obliged to defer to the West — and Seoul — on the Korean Peninsula questions. At the same time, predictions of the imminent fall of the North Korean regime had proved to be wrong. It became clear to Moscow that the DPRK was not destined for an inevitable implosion and, indeed, could continue for quite a long time. Furthermore, with the economic situation in Russia rapidly improving, Moscow no longer needed South Korea's largesse, especially considering the disappointing fact that hopes for large South Korean investments had not materialized in the 1990s.

Moscow saw an opportunity to heighten Russia's international influence and prestige by reinserting itself into the Korean Peninsula politics through restoring links with the DPRK. The Putin administration judged — correctly — that rebuilding ties with Pyongyang, while preserving good relations with Seoul, would again make Russia a player to be reckoned with in Northeast Asia. The new policy manifested itself in the highest level visits. Putin went to Pyongyang in 2000, becoming the first Russian leader to visit North Korea, while Kim Jong-il traveled to Russia in 2001, 2002 and 2011. In 2003, Russia also became the founding member of the six-party talks, reportedly at the insistence of Pyongyang, thus institutionalizing and legitimizing Moscow's role on the Korean Peninsula.

During that period, Russia was careful to pursue equidistance —

or equal closeness — in relations with Seoul and Pyongyang regarding security issues. Recognizing the South's concerns about the North's development of nuclear and ballistic weapons and disapproving of Pyongyang's provocative statements and actions, Moscow simultaneously pointed to the need to safeguard the DPRK's "legitimate" security interests. Russia supported the United Nations Security Council sanctions punishing North Korea for its nuclear and ballistic missile program, but Moscow, along with Beijing, worked to take the edge off the sanctions as opposed to harsher measures backed by the United States and Japan.<sup>34</sup> Throughout the 2000s, Moscow's stance on North Korea was close to Beijing's. However, that similarity was not due to Russia's subordination of its North Korea policy to China's wishes but rather stemmed from the convergence of interests: neither Moscow nor Beijing wanted a North Korean implosion, an outcome considered likely under stiffer sanctions.

Moscow did not explicitly call for the continuation of the status quo on the Korean Peninsula, but its emphasis on the need to seek "peaceful diplomatic solutions" to the North Korean issue in effect meant conservation of the existing geopolitical realities and preservation of North Korea as a sovereign entity. The prevailing view in the Russian foreign policy community was that North Korean collapse would likely cause radical changes in the Northeast Asian balance of power that might be detrimental to Russia's national interests. The proponents of this view argued that the forced demise of North Korea would essentially mean the revision of the World War II outcomes. They were concerned that an isolated and weakened North Korea would be annexed by U.S.-allied South Korea, expanding the U.S. sphere of influence in Northeast Asia and probably even seeing U.S. troops arriving in North Korea. That was why Moscow needed to maintain good relations with Pyongyang and help keep it afloat,

34. Until 2008, under the administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, the ROK generally sided with China and Russia, being in favor of a more accommodating approach to North Korea, whereas the succeeding conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye have taken a much tougher stance on Pyongyang, more in line with the U.S. position.



despite the eccentricity of the Kims' dynastic regime.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, in the 2000s, Moscow's commitment to preservation of the DPRK was not without serious reservations. At that time, it seemed quite likely that Moscow would at some point conclude that continuation of the North Korean regime was not in its interests and benefited China much more than Russia. After all, it was Chinese, not Russian, companies that enjoyed the dominant position in North Korea. Furthermore, even if U.S. troops were to be stationed in North Korea after unification, they would be of much more concern to China than to Russia, if only because China shared a much longer border with North Korea (China's border with North Korea is 1,416 kilometers long while Russia's is only 19 kilometers).

One also had to consider the economic gains that Russia was well positioned to reap as a result of Korean unification. Major projects that were stalled due to the inter-Korean conflict, such as a gas pipeline from Russia to Korea and the linking of Korean railways to the Russian Trans-Siberian Railway, would go ahead if the North Korean problem was finally resolved. More generally, North Korea was basically an economic wasteland, with very little commercial opportunities for the neighboring Russian Far East (RFE). Moreover, it separated Russia from the powerhouse of South Korean economy. Korean unification would give the RFE overland access to a single market of 75 million people with high demand for Russian commodities.

Lastly, Moscow was not happy with North Korea's steady progress in the development of nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles. First, because of the immediate safety and security risks this posed to the RFE and, second, because the increase in the number of nuclear powers devalued Russia's own nuclear deterrent, undermining a crucial basis of Moscow's great-power standing in the world.

35. Georgy Toloraya, "Another Cycle of the Korean Crisis, 2008-2010: Russia's Interests and the Prospects for Getting out of the Korean Impasse" (in Russian), *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka* [Far Eastern Affairs], no. 5 (September-October 2010), pp. 3-19. See also Igor Tolstokulakov, "Korea, Russia and the 21st-Century Challenges," in *Russia, America, and Security in the Asia-Pacific*, Rouben Azizian (ed.) (Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2006).

Such considerations might have eventually led Moscow to a tougher stance on Pyongyang and acceptance of a swift Korean unification, even if it should have been carried out as absorption of North Korea by a pro-U.S. South Korea. As Dmitri Trenin argued, unlike Beijing, Kremlin did not worry much about the prospect of North Korea disappearing from the political map since Pyongyang served as a protective buffer for China rather than Russia.<sup>36</sup>

In the 2000s and up to the Ukraine crisis, Russia's preferred geopolitical vision for Northeast Asia was one of rules-based multipolar balance of power — a concert of powers in which Moscow would be one of the participants. Russia did not particularly like America's military-political hegemony in the region. But neither did it want Chinese predominance, despite the "strategic partnership" with Beijing. A unified Korea, with reduced security dependence on Washington and more clout vis-à-vis Beijing and Tokyo, was seen by many in Moscow as instrumental in establishing a power equilibrium in Northeast Asia that would be resistant to the dominance of any single actor. That constituted one more reason for Russia's potential interest in Korean unification.

Perhaps even a unified Korea that retained some form of security ties with the United States could have been acceptable to Moscow, as long as Russia's relations with Washington were reasonably tolerable — neither very friendly, nor adversarial — just the way they stood in the 2000s. This contrasted with China's stance: Beijing obviously preferred to keep Korea divided rather than seeing a united and strong country on China's borders, unless, of course, a unified Korea recognized itself as part of the Chinese strategic sphere of influence, a very unlikely prospect.

36. Dmitri Trenin, "Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story" (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2012), p. 194, <http://carnegieendowment.org/pdf/book/post-imperium.pdf>.

### **2014 and Beyond: Tilting toward Pyongyang**

The Ukraine crisis that started to unfold in 2013 and culminated in 2014 profoundly transformed Russia's foreign policy. The competition with the United States that hitherto had been tempered by significant amount of bilateral engagement and cooperation turned into bitter enmity, while Moscow made moves to consolidate its strategic partnership with Beijing into something resembling a quasi-alliance. This has had considerable repercussions for Russia's approaches to the Korean Peninsula, visible in the rapid improvement of Russia-North Korea ties and the mounting difficulties in Russia-South Korea relations.

During 2014 and 2015, Russian-North Korean relations have remarkably grown in intensity. There has been a flurry of high-level visit exchanges. Since February 2014, the DPRK Supreme People's Assembly Presidium Chairman Kim Yong-nam, Minister of External Economic Relations Ri Ryong-nam, Foreign Minister Ri Su-yong, Kim Jong-un's special envoy Choe Ryong-hae, Supreme People's Assembly Chairman Choe Thae-bok and other senior officials visited Russia.<sup>37</sup> Russia reciprocated by sending to Pyongyang multiple delegations, including Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Trutnev and Minister for the Russian Far East Development Alexander Galushka. Although the expected visit of the DPRK's supreme leader Kim Jong-un to Moscow for the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany did not materialize (Pyongyang was instead represented by Kim Yong-nam, the number two in the DPRK state hierarchy), this did not slow the momentum of Russia-North Korea reinvigorated ties, with 2015 designated as the Year of Friendship of Russia and the DPRK. In November 2015, Moscow and Pyongyang signed an agreement on "preventing dangerous military activity." The agreement, concluded at the level of the two countries' general staffs, was an indication of increased military contacts between Russia and the

37. Pavel Cherkashin, "Current Russian-North Korean Relations and Prospects of Their Development" (Russian International Affairs Council, August 24, 2015), [http://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/dvfu/?id\\_4=2022](http://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/dvfu/?id_4=2022).

DPRK.<sup>38</sup>

On the economic front, there have also been a number of significant developments:

- The issue of North Korea's debt to Russia (inherited from the Soviet era) was finally settled.
- The upgrade of the 54-kilometer railway link from Russia's Khasan to the North Korean port of Rajin was completed, along with the modernization of the Rajin port facilities. The project was financed by the state-owned Russian Railways. This allows the use of the port of Rajin for transshipment of cargos coming via the Trans-Siberian from Russia bound for China, South Korea and other Asia-Pacific countries. Moreover, Khasan-Rajin project is considered as the first stage of the grand design to link up the Russian Trans-Siberian mainline with the prospective Trans-Korean Railway.
- North Korea agreed to relax visa regulations for Russian businesspeople and facilitate their work activities in the DPRK.
- Russia and the DPRK have made steps to use rubles in their commercial transactions. In particular, it was announced that Russian businesses doing trade through North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank can make payments in rubles.<sup>39</sup>
- Russian-North Korean Business Council was set up.
- Negotiations are underway to lease large tracts of agricultural land in the RFE (in Khabarovsk Krai) for North Koreans to cultivate.
- The construction of a cross-border automobile bridge connecting Russian and North Korean sides of the Tumen River, in addition to the existing railway link, is now under discussion.

These and other developments indicate that Russia-North Korea ties are now at their highest point since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both being ostracized by the West and subjected to harsh sanctions, Russia and the DPRK now evidently feel more empathy with each other. Moscow sees Pyongyang as one of the few countries that are

38. Leo Byrne, "N. Korea, Russia Sign Military Agreement," *NK News*, November 13, 2015.

39. Russia, Ministry for the Far East Development, Press Release, January 14, 2015, [http://minvostokrazvitia.ru/press-center/news\\_minvostok/?ELEMENT\\_ID=2862](http://minvostokrazvitia.ru/press-center/news_minvostok/?ELEMENT_ID=2862).

not afraid of openly challenging the U.S.-led international order. In particular, North Korea expressed support for Russia over Crimea. In turn, Moscow defended the DPRK at the UN Security Council when it voted, along with China, against the inclusion of the issue of human rights in North Korea on the UNSC agenda.<sup>40</sup> Moscow also probably wants to use its increased support for North Korea as additional leverage in the dealings with the West, Seoul and Tokyo, while North Korea needs Russia to reduce its extreme dependence on China.

Contrasting with the renaissance of Russia-North Korea friendship, Moscow's relations with Seoul have soured somewhat. Unlike Japan, South Korea has refused to formally sanction Russia over Ukraine. However, being an America's ally, Seoul cannot but take into account the state of U.S.-Russian relations. Similar to Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, ROK's President Park Geun-hye declined Putin's invitation to attend the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow in May 2015 sending instead a low-ranking representative. Weighing current political risks, many Korean firms suspended their investment plans in Russia. Moscow, for its part, expressed strong disapproval of Seoul's intentions to host America's THAAD missile defense system.<sup>41</sup>

Trilateral projects, involving Russia, and North and South Korea, are making very little progress, primarily because Seoul is still reluctant to commit to them in a substantial way. For example, despite an agreement reached during the summit between Putin and Park Geun-hye in November 2013, South Korea has not yet made any investments in the Khasan-Rajin project. As of October 2015, South Korean involvement in the Rajin venture has been limited to just two "test shipments" of Siberian coal to Pohang. Similarly, the Trans-Korean gas pipeline project has never got off the ground, even though a "road map" for its implementation was signed by Gazprom and Kogas in September 2011. Russia is also unhappy about the lack of Korean investment in the Russian Far East. There are practically no major

40. Ankit Panda, "North Korean Human Rights Abuses on the Agenda at UN Security Council," *The Diplomat*, December 23, 2014.

41. "U.S. THAAD Installation in South Korea Poses Security Threat to Russia?" *Sputnik*, April 3, 2015.

projects funded by South Korean capital in the RFE. Russian officials are openly expressing their disappointment over the fact that countless declarations of intent for economic collaboration are not translating into real actions, with the South Korean side dragging its feet.<sup>42</sup>

South Korea's alliance with the United States is making Russia-ROK relations more problematic. Prior to the Ukraine crisis, Russia tended to separate the European security agenda from the Asia-Pacific one. While NATO was viewed as a major concern, Moscow did not care much about the network of U.S.-led alliances in the Asia-Pacific. After Ukraine, such compartmentalization is no longer possible. U.S.-Russian relations in the Asia-Pacific have started to acquire the same confrontational pitch as seen in Eastern Europe. Washington has leaned on its East Asian allies to sign up to the sanctions regime against Russia. At the same time, Moscow has stepped up its criticism of the U.S. alliances in Asia, portraying them as the main destabilizing force in the region. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, after talks with his Chinese counterpart in Beijing, expressed "concern over U.S. attempts to strengthen its military and political clout in the Asia-Pacific" and called for the establishment of "a collective regional security system."<sup>43</sup> Never before has a high-ranking Russian official made such explicit remarks challenging the U.S.-centered security order in East Asia. To reinforce the message, Russian strategic bombers increased their activities in the Pacific, circling Guam during one especially provocative mission.<sup>44</sup>

Seoul, along with Tokyo, is perceived by Moscow as a junior and compliant military-political partner of Washington. Thus, the rising confrontation between Russia and the United States inevitably casts a shadow over Moscow's relations with America's loyal allies. Of special concern to Moscow is the prospect of an integrated missile

42. "Remarks by Alexei Starichkov, Director of International Cooperation Department, Primorsky Krai Regional Government," *PrimaMedia*, September 15, 2015.

43. "Russia, China Seek to Form Asia-Pacific Collective Security System Defense Minister," TASS, November 18, 2015.

44. Bill Gertz, "Russian Bombers Threaten Guam," *Washington Free Beacon*, November 19, 2014.

defense system involving the United States, Japan and South Korea, which partially explains Kremlin's harsh reaction to the plans of THAAD deployment on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>45</sup>

In a similar fashion, since the inception of the Ukraine crisis, Moscow's position on the inter-Korean issues has changed. Whereas Russia, in accordance with its carefully balanced equidistant posture, avoided taking sides in the North-South antagonism in the past, it has since been tilting toward the DPRK. In their statements, Russian officials stress that the high level of tensions on the Peninsula is caused, to a large extent, by "the increasing scale of U.S.-ROK war games" and "the military activities by the United States on the Korean Peninsula and the surrounding areas."<sup>46</sup>

Russia remains officially committed to the goal of denuclearization of North Korea and favors the resumption of the six-party talks. However, Russia now accentuates the need for the U.S.-ROK alliance to scale down their military posture aimed at North Korea as a crucial condition for successful negotiation process with Pyongyang. At the same time, Moscow seems more willing to tolerate North Korea's nuclear shenanigans. The consensus is jelling in Russia's foreign policy making community that North Korea's denuclearization can at best be achieved only in the distant future.<sup>47</sup> What can realistically be accomplished is the freezing of further nuclear development by North Korea in exchange for the U.S.-ROK alliance reducing its military activities. Thus the DPRK should be treated as a de facto nuclear power which it proclaims itself.<sup>48</sup>

45. Russia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Interview with Russia's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Morgulov," September 2, 2015, [http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/briks/-/asset\\_publisher/RdIYjVvdPAwg/content/id/1731468](http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/briks/-/asset_publisher/RdIYjVvdPAwg/content/id/1731468).

46. Russia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Interview with Russian Ambassador to the DPRK Alexander Matsegora," June 25, 2015, [http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/kp/-/asset\\_publisher/VJy7Ilg5QaAII/content/id/1527489](http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/kp/-/asset_publisher/VJy7Ilg5QaAII/content/id/1527489).

47. Georgy Toloraya, "Korean Security and Unification Dilemmas: A Russian Perspective," (Korea Economic Institute of America Academic Paper Series, June 11, 2015), <http://www.keia.org/publication/korean-security-and-unification-dilemmas-russian-perspective>.

48. Author conversations with Russian officials and foreign policy experts

## Russia and China: Exchanging Korea for Ukraine?

Where does China stand in the Russia-North Korea relationship? According to one view that has gained some currency among South Korean experts, one of Russia's important objectives in expanding cooperation with the DPRK is "to check the growing influence of China" in the North.<sup>49</sup> Yet there is hardly any evidence to corroborate this claim. It may be true that Pyongyang seeks to diversify away from its overreliance on China by boosting partnership with Russia. However, as argued previously, Russia has its own motives to strengthen ties with the DPRK. Countering China is not one of them. Even if Russia tried to compete with China over North Korea, that would not be a major headache for Beijing. The Chinese are well aware that Russia is in no position to outperform China when it comes to economic exchanges with the DPRK. In 2014, Russia's trade with North Korea amounted to a mere USD 92 million while China-North Korea trade stood at USD 6.86 billion (90.6% of the North's total external trade). Even if Russia and North Korea manage to increase their trade to the amount of USD 1 billion by 2020, which is the official target,<sup>50</sup> that will still be a far cry from the Sino-North Korean commercial relationship. Russian investments in the North are limited to the Khasan-Rajin project. Given the unenviable condition of Russia's economy and the worsening shortage of funds even for domestic development needs, it is doubtful that Russia would be able to commit substantial financial resources for ventures in North Korea.<sup>51</sup> Rather than being

(Vladivostok and Moscow, 2014-2015).

49. See, for example, Yi Seong-Woo, "Multilateral Cooperation in East Asia with the Connection of TKR-TSR," (paper presented at the conference on "Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative between Russia and South Korea," Vladivostok, Far Eastern Federal University, July 15, 2015).

50. "The Minister: Trade Turnover between Russia and the DPRK Can Reach \$1 billion by 2020," RIA Novosti, April 27, 2015.

51. In 2014, a major project called "Pobeda" ("Victory") was announced by Moscow under which Russia intends to make substantial investments, to the tune of USD 25 billion over 20 years, in North Korea's mining industry and infrastructure in exchange for gaining access to the DPRK's mineral wealth.

concerned about Russia's efforts to expand economic ties with the North, China may actually be welcoming them. After all, Beijing is known to have long pushed Pyongyang toward more liberal and open economy — something that will be facilitated by more trade and investment engagement with Russia.

Since the start of the six-party process, Russia and China have been largely aligned in their approaches resisting external attempts at regime change in North Korea and insisting that Pyongyang's legitimate security interests should be respected. This remains the case. However, an important change may be taking place in Russia's strategic thinking toward the Korean Peninsula. As noted previously, in the 2000s and early 2010s, Russia played an independent, albeit a relatively peripheral, role in the Korean Peninsula geopolitics. Moscow's interests coincided with Beijing's to a considerable degree, but Russia's ultimate goal was to secure a multipolar balance of power in Northeast Asia dominated neither by the United States nor China. In this regard, Beijing's preeminence on the Korean Peninsula would have been as unpalatable to Moscow as Washington's. However, by 2013-2014, Russia's mounting conflict with the West that culminated in the Ukraine crisis changed Moscow's calculus. First, the Ukraine mess has distracted Russia's attention and resources from East Asia, including the Korean Peninsula. Second, emotional anti-Americanism has permeated Russian foreign policy, making Washington's enemies Moscow's friends and poisoning Russia's relations with U.S. allies. Third, and perhaps most important, Russia's growing reliance on China is making Russia more receptive to Beijing's interests in the Asia-Pacific. One of Russia's leading experts on East Asia and Korea, Georgy Toloraya laments that Russia shows passivity in the Asia-Pacific affairs for fear that its more independent and proactive stance might anger China. In particular, Russia has "almost accepted Chinese domination in Korean affairs."<sup>52</sup>

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However, this project so far looks more like a vague declaration of intent rather than a specific business plan. The main problem, of course, is the absence of reliable funding.

52. Georgy Toloraya, "The Crisis-ridden Status-quo on the Korean Peninsula

Russia's growing willingness to play second fiddle to China in East Asia, and on the Korean Peninsula, reflects the reality that Moscow does not perceive this geographic area as its vital interest. To be sure, the Asia-Pacific, and especially the Korean Peninsula, is important to Moscow in many respects but its significance cannot be compared to Russian stakes in Ukraine and other post-Soviet regions — the places Russia is literally prepared to fight for. At the same time, China has fundamental interests in the Korean Peninsula and views Eastern Europe as a peripheral concern. This makes possible, and logical, a sort of geopolitical deal-making between Moscow and Beijing, with Russia sacrificing its great power aspirations in East Asia and showing deference to Beijing on the Korean Peninsula in return for China's tacit support in Kremlin's confrontation with the U.S.-led West over Ukraine.

One indication of Russia's growing strategic collaboration with China on the Peninsula issue has been the two countries' joint opposition to the THAAD missile defense system's prospective deployment in South Korea. In April 2015, Russia and China held the first round of the bilateral dialogue on security in Northeast Asia in which the THAAD issue was one of the main agenda items.<sup>53</sup> In military terms, the American-led missile defense in Northeast Asia is a much bigger threat to China's missile forces than Russia's. Thus, joining with China in condemning the THAAD plans, Moscow shows political solidarity with Beijing.

It may be expected that Moscow and Beijing will increasingly coordinate their positions on security issues in Northeast Asia and the Peninsula, thus gradually consolidating the emerging strategic divide of the U.S.-Japan-ROK trio versus the China-Russia axis.

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and Russia's Objectives" (in Russian), in *Aziatsko-Tixookeanskoe Sotrudnichestvo i Mesto Rossii v Regional'nom Razviti* [Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific and Russia's place in the region's development], Konstantin Kokarev, Elena Suponina, and Boris Volkhonsky, eds. (Moscow: Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014), p. 104.

53. Russia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Interview with Russia's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Morgulov."

However, the real importance of Sino-Russian collaboration on the Peninsula may be revealed in case of a North Korean contingency. Although the collapse of the DPRK's current regime is by no means imminent, the situation in the North is basically unpredictable. The regime may continue for another fifty years, but it is almost as likely that it will start falling apart in one year. The two players that would have the highest stakes in the event of a North Korean implosion are obviously the ROK and China. One can argue that, for Seoul and Beijing, the North is as significant as Ukraine is for Moscow. They will seek to control the process of the regime's collapse and shape its outcome in order to secure their own interests in the northern part of the Peninsula.

Even though China admittedly has a substantial leverage over North Korea, it may need Russian support if and when the DPRK begins to crumble. Apart from China and the ROK, Russia is the only country neighboring North Korea. Moreover, unlike the DMZ, Russia's border with the North is not heavily militarized. This could make it easier for Russia to intervene, jointly with China, in the DPRK. Russia's rich experience in carrying out military and hybrid warfare operations in recent years — from Chechnya to Crimea — will certainly be an extra asset for China that has not tested its armed force since 1979 (when it launched an offensive against Vietnam). Putin's bold intervention in Syria underscored Russia's increased willingness — and capacity — to undertake military gambles in foreign countries.

Swift coordinated actions by China and Russia will guarantee that the outcome of a North Korean contingency will be in accordance with their geopolitical interests. Beijing would aim for the stabilization of the North and installment of a new regime loyal to China while preventing the absorption of the DPRK by the South. Russia will back Beijing's game, especially if China allows Moscow to retain some degree of influence over North Korea. If China and Russia act in lockstep in a North Korean crisis, Seoul's chances to achieve unification with the North on its own terms are reduced to near zero.

Intervening in the North, China and Russia will most likely rely on the DPRK elite, several million people who are close to power and

enjoy privileges. The North Korean ruling class is well aware of the unenviable fate that befell East Germany's communist establishment after Germany's unification. Indeed, in a unified Korea the DPRK's aristocracy would likely get a much harsher treatment than in Germany's case. Such considerations may lead the North's elite to collaborate with China and Russia, even though foreign intervention might run against the feelings of North Korean nationalism.

What can Seoul do to prevent Russia from colluding with China on North Korea? Very little. The ROK barely has any leverage over Russia, whereas China's influence on Russia is substantial — and growing. Politically, Moscow and Seoul are not tied by any substantive mutual commitments, while Moscow maintains a quasi-alliance relationship with Beijing. On the economic front, China is Russia's number one trading partner, with bilateral trade totaling USD 87.6 billion in 2014 (by comparison, Russia-South Korea trade in the same year was USD 26.6 billion). The stock of South Korea's investment in Russia, in 2014, stood at USD 2.1 billion,<sup>54</sup> while China's accumulated investment in Russia amounted to USD 7.6 billion (as of 2013).<sup>55</sup> The Western sanctions have made China even more indispensable for Russia as a trade and investment partner.

For the Russian Far East (RFE), Japan and South Korea still rank as the biggest trading partners, accounting, respectively, for 26.3 and 26.2 percent of the RFE's foreign trade in 2014. This is slightly ahead of China's share of 26.1 percent.<sup>56</sup> However, if one takes into account the so-called informal cross-border commerce that flourishes between China and the RFE and is not registered by official statistics, China

54. Russia, Embassy in the ROK, "Russia's Relations with the ROK," last modified September 25, 2015, [http://russian-embassy.org/ru/?page\\_id=111](http://russian-embassy.org/ru/?page_id=111).

55. Russia, Ministry of Economic Development, "The Main Results of Investment Cooperation of Russia and China," last modified September 25, 2015, [http://www.ved.gov.ru/exportcountries/cn/cn\\_ru\\_relations/cn\\_rus\\_projects/](http://www.ved.gov.ru/exportcountries/cn/cn_ru_relations/cn_rus_projects/).

56. Russia, Federal Customs Service, "The Review of the Russian Far East's Foreign Trade in 2014," last modified September 25, 2015, <http://dvtu.customs.ru/attachments/article/16235/%D0%94%D0%92%20%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B7%D0%BE%D1%80.doc>.

will emerge as the RFE's top trade partner.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, unlike China and Japan, South Korea is not engaged in any major business projects in the RFE.

## Conclusion

Sino-Russian relations are now at their highest point since the mid-1950s. Some would even argue that the two countries are on the verge of reinstating a full-blown alliance. In the 2000s, Moscow envisioned a single European space from Lisbon to Vladivostok that would be based on shared values, interests, and partnership with the European Union. Today, the Russian leadership talks of building a continental Eurasian "common economic space" in collaboration with China.<sup>58</sup>

The question is how durable this new edition of Sino-Russian entente is going to be. We may expect that the Moscow-Beijing axis will continue to exist, and possibly grow even stronger, as long as the leaders in Kremlin and Zhongnanhai perceive a common overriding threat from the world's only superpower, which both see as opposing Russia's and China's legitimate geopolitical interests and trying to undermine the two countries' political systems and social values.

In Moscow's bitter confrontation with the West, China is the only geo-economic alternative available to Russia. On the other hand, as long as there is a real risk of China clashing with the United States (over the South China Sea, Taiwan, or the Senkakus), the strong bond with Russia — the only major power that can provide Beijing with diplomatic support, military technology, and secure access to vital commodities — will be crucial for the PRC. Absent changes in the

57. Author interview with Natalya Ryzhova, Research Fellow with the Institute for Economic Research, Far Eastern Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Vladivostok, February 2015).

58. Russia, Kremlin, "Press Statement by Vladimir Putin Following Russian-Chinese Talks," May 8, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/49433>.

countries' political regimes, and with the United States being viewed as the principal foe by both Moscow and Beijing, the Sino-Russian axis will only grow stronger.

The entente of Russia and China, Northeast Asia's two major powers, will have an inevitable impact on the Korean Peninsula. Russia's post-Cold War policies toward the Korean Peninsula have passed through several stages. In the 1990s, Moscow abandoned Pyongyang in favor of Seoul, but ceased to be a player of consequence in the Peninsula's international politics. In the 2000s and early 2010s, Russia made efforts to restore its influence on the Korean Peninsula, pursuing balanced relations with both Seoul and Pyongyang while aiming for a multipolar equilibrium in Northeast Asia.

The drastic deterioration of Russia's relations with the West that was precipitated by the Ukraine crisis has had a noticeable impact on Russia's Korea strategy. Since around 2014, two major determinants have emerged in Russia's foreign policies, including those toward Korea. The first determinant is intense anti-Americanism, while the second is the rising dependence on China.

Russia's relations with North Korea have warmed considerably driven, to a large extent, by their shared enmity toward the United States. At the same time, Russia's relations with South Korea, a U.S. ally, have cooled. Prior to Ukraine, Russia could see at least some benefits in the North being annexed by the ROK. Post-Ukraine, a Korea unified on Seoul's terms, and hence an American ally, is anathema to Russia.

The standoff with the West has led Russia to strengthen its strategic partnership with China. This comes with a price, though. In exchange for China's benevolent neutrality with regard to Russia's actions in Ukraine, Moscow needs to acknowledge Chinese primacy in East Asia. It appears that Russia is prepared to drop its own great power ambitions in Northeast Asia and play second fiddle to China concerning the Peninsula affairs.

The Sino-Russian collaboration on Korea will be critical, if and when the DPRK regime starts to crumble. If China and Russia execute a swift and coordinated intervention in North Korea in order to prevent

the DPRK's annexation by the South and install a friendly regime, there is very little Seoul could do to prevent such a scenario.

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