

“A Turn to the Right?” A Russian Comment on the North Korean Policy of ROK Conservative Government

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Abstract

Since the election of a conservative government in Seoul in 2008, the situation on the Korean peninsula has deteriorated considerably. President Lee Myung-bak's hard-line policy toward the North provoked a Northern backlash and inter-Korean relations have nosedived. As a result, the ROK has sidelined itself from the diplomatic process of searching for a solution to the North Korean security problem which does not bring such a solution any closer, which in turn causes concern. The ROK international position and its leverage in North Korea seem to have deteriorated. Russia supports North-South Korean reconciliation and cooperation as a prerequisite for promoting peace and security in the neighboring area, which is the chief goal of Russian strategy on the Korean peninsula. A deterioration in the situation is not in line with Russian policies on Korea and Russian concepts of the desired state of affairs in this region. The US conservative administration similarly started with a hard-line policy toward Pyongyang but had to turn to dialogue and search for a compromise. In line with policy coordination with the US, the Lee Myung-bak's government should study this lesson and hopefully turn to more pragmatic policy sooner than the former did. That would create the necessary prerequisites for a broader degree of cooperation between Moscow and Seoul in Korean affairs and would benefit Russia, South and North Korea alike.

Key Words: inter-Korean relations, President Lee Myung-bak's North Korean policy, Korean policy of Russia, Russia-ROK strategic cooperation, policy coordination

Quite unexpectedly, after a decade of North-South Korean rapprochement and cooperation, the current situation on the peninsula suddenly reminds one of the worst of the 'Cold War' period. There are several reasons for this state of affairs, the basic being Pyongyang's desire to refrain from concessions in any area that concerns its system, but, regretfully, it was the advent of the new government of President Lee Myung-bak that symbolized the return to an increase in tensions. These tensions will hopefully be of a temporary nature. Although the basic intentions of the new ROK leadership might have been pragmatic and positive (denuclearization, assisting North Koreans to develop and join the international community on a reciprocal basis, etc.¹), their current achievements in these areas so far remind one of the old sayings about the road to hell being paved by good intentions.

This article tries to highlight the Lee government policy measures toward North Korea in the initial stages of the administration to reconstruct their possible interpretation by Pyongyang and to explain the motivations behind North Korean reactions to these policies. These observations are based on the author's experience of dealing with North Korea. An ancillary aim is to draw some lessons from the previous decade's policy. The article further provides a personalized analysis of the Russian position toward the Korean issue, inter-Korean relations, and the possibilities of Russian-Korean cooperation, without reflecting any official position of the government of Russia.

¹- The Lee Myung-bak government spoke about the plans to earmark US\$40 billion for an international cooperative fund to support DPRK economic growth in line with President Lee's plan to help increase the DPRK's per capita income to \$3,000 within a decade if it makes the decision to abandon its nuclear program and open its market. *Yonhap News Agency*, January 4, 2008.

An Initial Picture of North-South Korea Relations in 2008: An attempt to Explain Pyongyang’s Reaction

For Russian experts, it is no secret that North Koreans expected nothing good from the incoming conservative government²: North Koreans openly supported the liberal candidate and harshly criticized the Grand National Party before the elections, choosing Lee Hoi Chang as their target but actually warning the president-to-be Lee Myung-bak that tougher policies would not be welcomed by Pyongyang. However they took notice of the more or less positive pre-inauguration statements of President Lee and were carefully watching the new leadership’s initial actions with a hope that the real policy would be more pragmatic and result-oriented. Perhaps they took President Lee’s harsh rhetoric as a sort of a public relations exercise to appease conservatives and South Korean electorates, tired of the previous decade’s “liberal” concessions to North Korea.

It is worth noting that President Lee’s declarations and statements were and still are conciliatory. For example, speaking in New York in April 2008 he pointed out, “We have deep affection for our compatriots in the North, and have no intention of threatening its political system. Our goal is to help the North Korean economy stand on its own feet and assure its people a respectable life. Despite challenges and difficulties, we will persevere in the effort to persuade the North of our sincerity and good will.”³

President Lee also seems to publicly advance quite a rational position on North Korea’s possible social and economic future development, pointing out, “Many socialist nations have adopted a market economy and openness and are all successful and better off now. South Korea is ready to assist North Korea in change and openness. We have to move from confrontation to co-existence and from hostility to reconciliation. We’re always

²- The author’s interviews in Pyongyang, December 2007.

³- *The Nelson Report*, April 15, 2008.

open-minded toward the North,”⁴

However, in reality – at least for the first few months of Lee Myung-bak’s presidency – the implementation of the policy was controversial and the initial outcome in fact exceeded the worst expectations of North Koreans. It was almost as if most of the results of the “sunshine” decade have been re-evaluated and in many cases discarded.⁵

At the moment of writing, the milestones in President Lee’s formulation of North Korean policy have included the following stages (the author has simultaneously tried to explain how Pyongyang has perceived them and why it was so displeased):

- Even before inauguration President Lee, unexpectedly to many observers, attempted to eliminate the Ministry of Unification which allegedly took a far too pro-North Korean stance, sending a pretty controversial signal to Pyongyang. Predictably, North Koreans immediately became very suspicious about the true intentions of the incoming government even before its formal launch – the prejudice was there from the start.

- ≡ The position of President Lee that human rights issue will be at the forefront of relations with the North was for North Koreans like a red cloth to a bull. North Koreans view human rights issues not as discussions limited to this topic per se, but as an attempt to undermine their system and predictably are not prepared to openly give any concessions in this area. Horrendous as the human rights situation in North Korea is, it can only be improved by cautious, behind the scenes diplomatic work and concealed linkages, not by a straightforward approach and public declarations.

4- “Lee urges North Korea to Move toward Openness,” Seoul, *Yonhap*, May 18, 2008.

5- Kim Ha-Joong, the candidate Minister of Unification, said in the National Assembly in March that the ROK “must completely part with the sunshine policy,” <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catId=nk00300&num=3376>.

For example, making the return of the POWs from North Korea⁶ a condition of humanitarian aid predictably caused Pyongyang to be outraged; anyone with the slightest acquaintance with the North Korean mentality had no doubt that such a condition won't lead to any solution of the issue but at the same time would mean cessation of all assistance. North Koreans could not but regard this as a highly hostile act, especially at a moment when the country faces the worst problems since mid 1990s famine because of the 2007 natural disasters and due to the growing global food crisis. Pyongyang refrained from asking for food assistance from the South and the absence of ROK aid would undoubtedly worsen the humanitarian problems in the North, so Seoul's real adherence to improving the human rights situation becomes questionable.⁷ It is small wonder that the Government is under public pressure to be more flexible in providing humanitarian aid, making it less conditional.

- In general North Koreans feel deep uneasiness with any “advice” concerning “reforms and opening,” especially on an official level, seeing it as a plot to “undermine our system.”⁸ President Kim Dae-jung, fully committed to the aim of changing North Korea, has refrained from public declarations to this effect, and therefore was successful in really opening North Korea, at least to the extent possible. Public linkage of “opening” with large-scale aid by President Lee also affected the pride of

⁶- President Lee Myung-bak has asked the DPRK to consider sending home prisoners of war and captured civilians in return for receiving humanitarian aid, “since we are sending humanitarian aid, the North should consider humanitarian measures, without any conditions, on the pending issue of South Korean POWs and 400 kidnapped fishermen.” “South Korea Wants its POWs in Exchange for Aid,” *Associated Press*, Seoul, March 24, 2008.

⁷- Such a policy caused international concern. “Goodfriends” wrote, “The principle of ROK humanitarian aid to the DPRK is to unconditionally support the DPRK when it is in a dire situation. Why does the ROK government try to relate this to the nuclear problem or other political cases? Crop Costs Skyrocket,” *Napsnet Daily Report*, April 18, 2008.

⁸- Kim Jong-il himself said that the then President Roh Moo-hyun in October 2007, *Chosun Ilbo*, October 4, 2007.

North Korean leaders, so they had no choice but to rebuff them as a public attempt to 'bribe' them. At the same time the fearful hardliners received "proof" that the goal of the assistance is to undermine the North Korean system by imploding it from within and got the pretext to 'tighten the screws' and put a cap on developing their markets and cooperation with the "South Korean puppets."

Re-evaluation of the results of the October 2007 inter-Korean summit and declaration that not all of the North-South Korean agreements could be carried out was seen in Pyongyang as a reflection of a basically counter-productive and hostile stance, undermining the trust in such commitments. The newly-emerged 'pragmatic' approach in Seoul to these commitments provided for the suspension of North-South Korean cooperation projects requiring significant financial investment, among them reconstruction of the dilapidated North Korean infrastructure and the creation of a special "peace and cooperation zone" in the West (Yellow) Sea.⁹ North Koreans regarded it as a breach of trust and proof of hostile intentions. In their eyes, talk of "reciprocity" is just a pretext to avoid carrying out these burdensome obligations.

- Equally, the attempts to refer to an obscure 1991 agreement instead of two summit documents signed by Kim Jong-il were taken as an offense. It should be understood that the "Dear Leader's" (as North Koreans call Kim Jong-il) personal signing of an international document is not

⁹ - Leonid Petrov writes in a recent article, "Almost everything that Kim Jong-il and Roh Moo-hyun agreed upon at the October 2007 inter-Korean Summit falls into this "third category." The key development plan aimed at the construction of an economic center in and around Haeju, the North Korean port city about 75 kilometers west of Kaesong. A delay or cancellation will certainly prompt protests from Pyongyang, which is probably expecting the earliest implementation of the 2007 Summit, and will leave a deep scar of mistrust on inter-Korean relations in the future," <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/08025Petrov.html>.

something routine and is reserved for special occasions – actually as a manifestation of trust and a “special relationship” (that was clearly explained to Russians when Kim Jong-il signed the first-ever international declaration with President Putin). So something that can be interpreted by North Korean as revision of such a commitment is seen in the North as an act of treachery, that would inevitable undermine all other agreements reached so far in every sphere.

- North Koreans were especially upset by a declaration that denuclearization should come before any meaningful cooperation between South and North Korea. North Koreans consider that this is the issue to be negotiated with the US and resent Seoul’s meddling into the matter as they are waging a difficult tug of war with the US on the modalities of the process. The progress in this lengthy exercise is obvious, and I doubt Seoul’s pressure will speed it up; maybe the opposite is true. It is obvious that success depends mostly on normalization of the DPRK’s relations with the US, not any actions or declarations by the ROK. In fact, pressure-based policies by Seoul might become counterproductive. For example, denuclearization: Pyongyang might perceive the changed geopolitical situation as less favorable, which would make it feel weaker and therefore more time will be needed to arrive at a compromise with its opponents. Pyongyang cannot be pressured or “convinced” (as President Lee put it) to denuclearize; denuclearization might only be achieved in exchange for certain actions by opponents – like giving security guarantees and aid.

Such a position by the ROK government was also taken in Pyongyang as an open declaration of intent to stop all inter-Korean cooperation, as it was clear that at the time being no one could expect the denuclearization to happen in a short time. It is a mistake to think that cessation of assistance

could become a stimulus for Pyongyang to give more concessions or to ask for help; North Korean pride and the basic underlying principles of the *Juche* ideology would not allow that. On the contrary, it gives the Pyongyang hardiners much needed evidence to explain to the population the “hostile nature of South Korean regime” and put the blame on it for the hardships of the North.

- President Lee’s policy of closer cooperation with the United States has raised the fear in Pyongyang that this could lead to new coordinated attempts of pressure and isolation politics.¹⁰ North Koreans suspect that President Lee may try to get closer to the US by denouncing the past liberal ‘North Korean policy’ and therefore try to reach out not only to the current US government, but to conservative forces, inclined to change the Pyongyang regime. Every action by Seoul is seen in this context: Pyongyang became extremely concerned about Seoul’s desire to consider joining PSI, Missile Defense (MD), postpone wartime operational control transfer, and the general increase in military exercises.¹¹ The outcome of President Lee’s visit to Washington, which demonstrated President Bush’s support of President Lee’s policy of reciprocity, the accent on human rights, and the calm reaction to North Korean rhetoric in the hope that the North would just “get used to it” (and rumored discussion between the two Presidents of how North Korea should change “after Kim Jong-il”), hardly encouraged Pyongyang.
- Pyongyang became extremely wary about Seoul’s renewed cooperation with Japan wherein the ROK now is recognized as sharing a tough stance toward North Korea.¹² It is especially unhappy with Seoul’s stress on

¹⁰- [North] Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) wrote, “No matter how important the “improved alliance” with the US may be, the interests of the nation can never be sacrificed for the sake of the “alliance,”” *KCNA*, April 21, 2008.

¹¹- *KCNA*, April 18-19, 2008.

¹²- South Korean position was seen in Tokyo to become as tough as Japanese (which is fully

trilateral cooperation with Japan and the US to try to pressure Pyongyang into unconditional termination of their nuclear programs. Pyongyang was indignant that President Lee agreed to cooperate with Tokyo to resolve the abductions of Japanese citizens - this issue is seen as a bilateral one by North Koreans.¹³

- North Korea also views with suspiciousness Seoul's basic notion that relations with the North are just a part of DPRK foreign relations. Pyongyang wants 'special treatment.' A 'liaison office' suggested by President Lee in this context seems a questionable concept, as it downgrades the North to a 'just another partner.'¹⁴ Moreover, timing-wise, the proposal came just after Pyongyang had evicted South Korean government officials and therefore it would be hardly logical to take such a proposal seriously. So, therefore, it was clear from the start such a proposal would be rejected.¹⁵ Moreover, it makes one wonder what was the cause and purpose of this proposal in the first place.

All the experts are aware of the history of inter-Korean relations and, broadly, the history of North Korean relations with the world (views of which, it seems, are in short supply in the current ROK current government) and most experts had no great doubts as to what will follow as a response

uncompromised). During President Lee's visit to Japanese Prime Minister Fukuda noted, "(South Korea's) policy is basically similar to our country's stance of providing economic aid only after the resolution of the nuclear, abduction, and missile issues and the establishment of diplomatic relations, and I feel assured," http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2008/4/21/worldupdates/20080421T124452Z_01_NOOTR_RTRMDNC_0_331492-1&sec=Worldupdates.

¹³ - <http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/show/200280,japan-south-korea-pledge-to-work-together-on-north-korea.html>.

¹⁴ - South Korean experts also rightfully argue that the suggestion lacks sincerity as it came at a time where all working-level dialogue has been suspended. "To make such a proposal without any prior consultation or discussion with the North but through a third-party media interview shows it lacks sincerity," *Korea Herald*, April 21, 2008.

¹⁵ - "N. Korea Reject Inter-Korean Liaison Office," *Dong-A Ilbo*, April 28, 2008.

to President Lee's new approach. No one can hope to change the nature of the North Korean regime by a few declarations or a tougher approach - it has been tried many times and has never worked. Predictably, North Koreans would only toughen their own positions and answer in kind, and it should be noted that they have restrained themselves for a long time. It was only two months after the actual start of Lee government that they openly displayed their displeasure.

The last straw came with the words of the newly-designated ROK chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Kim Tae-Young that the ROK military is prepared to launch a preemptive attack on the DPRK's nuclear installations if they become a military threat.¹⁶ Such dangerous statements, even as the bluster that they might be, were taken by Pyongyang in the context of previous hard-line policies. The next day, the DPRK test-fired missiles on its East coast as a demonstration of military power.¹⁷ Pyongyang also has sent jet fighters to test the ROK's air defenses and threatened to reduce Seoul to ashes as a response to any hard-line policy.¹⁸ Following this, North Koreans deported South Korean officials, virtually suspended all North-South contacts and lashed out with offensive, detailed criticism of President Lee Myung-bak, unprecedented in terms of its highly personal nature.

The April 1st article in the *Rodong Shinmun* using nearly obscene language, outperforming even the peculiar standards of North Korean abusive propaganda clichés, called President Lee "a political charlatan" and voiced the strongest possible discontent, counting all his "sins": giving "priority to South Korea-US relations," "nuclear racket," "purge against the

¹⁶- Kim Min-seok and Jung Ha-won, "North's Nukes on Attack Radar," *JoongAng Ilbo*, March 26, 2008.

¹⁷- Burt Herman, "North Korea Tests Short-Range Missiles," *Associated Press*, April 28, 2008.

¹⁸- Jon Herskovitz, "North Korea Snarls As South's Sunshine Policy Fades," *Reuters*, March 31, 2008.

progressive pro-unification forces," "war exercises," "participating in dangerous PSI and MD," utterances of "opening," "accusations over human rights," and reputed "generosity" in aid. It looks as if, as was the case with President Kim Young Sam in 1994, that Pyongyang, having watched President Lee's initial policies, has finally made the strategic decision not to deal with his administration. The only passage that gives some hope is that "*should... [Seoul] opt for confrontation (italics by the author)...* The DPRK will have no option but to change its approach toward the South,"¹⁹ implying that should Seoul abstain from pressure, relations could be normalized.

The South's demonstratively calm reaction to the signals sent by the North has also gone a bit too far - ignoring one's opponent (especially such a nervous and insecure one as North Korea) might carry the risk of more articulated actions in their desire to be heard. For example, new conflicts in the disputed area of the Yellow Sea cannot be excluded. North Koreans would be hardly willing to put up with so called "benign neglect" in terms of their actions and could try to force Seoul to pay more attention to their needs. President Lee's remarks, that North Koreans "are using military rhetoric to threaten us, but that is all,"²⁰ could prompt Pyongyang to take more malicious actions.

President Lee's rhetoric about North Korea has become a bit more subdued after his visit to the US - probably as a reflection of the US administration's desire to get a deal on the nuclear issue with North Korea as soon as possible, for which Seoul's hard-line policies might be not very helpful.²¹ President Lee indirectly admitted that the initial policy responses of Seoul need some correction: "Both North and South Korea must change

¹⁹ - *Rodong Shinmun*, April 1, 2008.

²⁰ - *Korea Herald*, April 17, 2008.

²¹ - http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/04/19/us.skorea.ap/index.html?section=cnn_latest.

their ways,” quoted as saying by the *Washington Post*.²² He also confirmed that he was open to a summit with Kim Jong-il if the talks would generate results: “I will agree to it when the need is real and I have already said publicly that I am willing to meet with him not just once, but many times, if such a meeting will yield substantial and real results.”²³

However, President Lee still holds a more radical position even in comparison with that of Washington on the nuclear issue: he has stressed the need for verification and has said (indirectly arguing with the US) that any softening of Pyongyang’s obligations under a six-country deal to fully declare its nuclear program could lead to “a lot more serious problems.” As a result of the visits to the US and Japan, South Korean experts predict, “inter-Korean relations will aggravate. These summit talks were considered to be a point to adjust Seoul’s North Korean policies. President Lee made sure of his decision to connect his North Korean policies with fortified trilateral coordination with Washington and Tokyo.”²⁴

The result of the deterioration of North-South Korea relations in the first months of 2008 was that South Korea – clearly unintentionally – sidelined itself from the diplomatic process of searching for a solution to the North Korean security problem.²⁵ North Korea also tries to minimize the ROK role in the diplomatic process on the nuclear problem that could lead to a decrease of its influence to the DPRK at a period when South Korean businesses will have to compete with China for control over Northern resources and future markets.²⁶ ROK international positions and its leverage

²² - *Korea Herald*, April 18, 2008.

²³ - http://www.spacewar.com/reports/US_not_scaling_back_demands_on_North_Korea_Bush_999.html.

²⁴ - *Korea Herald*, April 21, 2008.

²⁵ - This is recognized even by South Korean own experts. See Jung Chang-Hyun, “ROK Government Loses Influence Even In The Six-Party Talks,” *Pressian*, April 23, 2008.

²⁶ - Kyunghyang Shinmun wrote, “Once the ROK loses its leverage in inter-Korean relations, the ROK government’s intervention power will steeply decrease not only in the six-party talks and the DPRK nuclear issue but also in the political situation of the Korean peninsula... The realization [by DPRK] of so-called “open to US, isolate ROK”

in North Korea seem to deteriorate.

A Russian Retrospective View on the Sunshine Policy

All that is happening is a sharp contrast to the tendencies of the last 10 or even more years, however, many defects of the "sunshine policy" (especially the not-so-sophisticated policy of President Roh Moo-hyun) might have had. Russia generally supported the last decade's policies precisely because they were aimed at reconciliation and assisting the North to set the basis for cooperation and would have led therefore to increased security in Korean peninsula.²⁷ Many Russians fully share the evaluation by President Kim Dae-jung, who, criticizing the current policy in April 2008, noted, "The June 15 inter-Korean summit held in 2000 broke down the wall of the Cold War and animosity between the two Koreas, which had lasted for more than a half century, and opened the road of exchange and collaboration... Tensions on the Korean peninsula have dramatically had eased, and economic, cultural, and tourism exchanges were progressing. These developments are playing a significant role in promoting inter-Korean peace and ending the Cold War."²⁸

During this period, despite periodical resurgence of tensions, it looked as if North and South Korea had tacitly come to a basic understanding of the need to coexist and cooperate for the foreseeable future.

is feared, Kim Keun-sik, "Time For 'Practical' Inter-Korean Conversation To Step Forward," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, April 30, 2008.

²⁷- An expert in South Korea wrote in 2005, "In general, this Russian vision of the ideal outcome is closer to the basic assumptions of Seoul's 'sunshine policy' than that of any other state. Even if the present author harbors much skepticism about the viability of such a 'reformed' North Korean state, these expectations might to some extent unite Seoul and Moscow in their dealing with the North." Andrei Lankov, "Russia's 'New Engagement' with North Korea and the Future of Northeast Asia," http://64.233.169.104/search?q=cache:jYTjuE1TZsJ:ifes.kyunghnam.ac.kr/study/ifes_forum_view.asp%3FifesforumNO%3D152%26page%3D12+Georgy+Bulychev&hl=ko&ct=clnk&cd=15&gl=us.

²⁸- *Korea Times*, April 18, 2008.

What is important is that it was unlike the unfortunate past without attempts to impose one side's values on the other. Having left the shell of relations determined by global superpower rivalry at the end of the 20th century, North and South Korea had the unique opportunity to use a common legacy and ethnic identity for settling historic animosity – and this has implications not only for Korea. At the same time, these “liberal winds” helped change both South and – even to a greater extent – North Korea. It is not accurate to say, as South Korean conservatives do, that the last decade's policies did not bring any change at all to the North.

These signs of changes are difficult to trace and it is hard to point out exactly what was the direct result of South Korean policies and what was spontaneous. It should be understood how difficult it was for Kim Jong-il to introduce any changes, because he could not risk bringing chaos into the existing power structure in the midst of a crisis (a Russian proverb says, “You don't change horses in mid-stream.”). He also could not risk undermining his legitimacy by any attempts to openly revise the heritage of his father. His actual attempts to do it – for example, when he apologized to the Japanese for abductions (this happened soon after the first inter-Korean summit, which gave Kim Jong-il hope that he could find compromises with his opponents) had unintended consequences and worked against any new concessions.

The relaxation of tensions between two Kereas brought about a little noticed but fundamental change: if Kim Il Sung had dreamed of the unification of Korea through communizing South Korea, Kim Jong-il's basic value is survival, which makes peaceful coexistence with the South the imperative. Kim Jong-il (who now cannot but think about his successor) is neither Nero, nor Louis XIY – he wants to keep the state in place. The decade of relaxation of tensions with the South (if only it could have coincided with détente with the US) prompted the North Korean leadership to look for variants, not just holding on to communist dogmas. In fact, continuing

paying lip service to the "our brand of socialism," they tried to undertake a pragmatic search for a national idea, which would make the state sustainable and explain to the population why it should make all efforts and endure hardships and sufferings, while the promised socialist paradise is nowhere on the horizon. This search was not very obvious for an outsider and probably met harsh opposition from hard-line ideologues and the military alike, but it was slowly changing the ideological 'landscape' in parallel with changes occurring with the generations. The most important thing is that it is moving toward more reliance on Korean nationalism, the major factor for which was reconciliation with South Korea, drifting away from a mostly communist ideology (Marxism-Leninism plus *Juche*) to that of a national-egalitarian one. The thesis "uri minjok kiri" became the basis of new ideological approaches. This was the direct result of the 'sunshine policy.' South Korean popular culture won a foothold in North Korea, and the North started to consider the idea that bridging the gap with the South could eventually legitimize the regime, as it would become possible for North and South Korea to act together and consolidate to eventually win a worthy place in the world for itself. This would perfectly fit the North Korean *Juche* (self-reliance) ideology, which incidentally was invented in North Korea long before the import of any Communist theories.

Kim Jong-il's system, relying on the military to carry on state directives and act as a power basis, is declining, but actually has many parallels with the South Korean experience of the 1960-1970s, which Kim Jong-il is known to attentively study (he is also quite respectful to President Park Jung Hee - that is why he chose to personally meet his daughter Park Geun Hye, although at the time she was an opposition leader challenging the 'sunshine policy'). It is important that a military dictatorship system, unlike a Communist one, which is untransformable and can only be dismantled, can evolve into a less rigid and less authoritarian one.

Due to reconciliation with the South and ensuing prospects for normalization of relations with the West, the foreign policy priorities changed in the beginning of the decade from supporting the ‘national-liberation struggle’ to more pragmatic goals of bridging the gap between North Korea and the world. Especially North Korean efforts to improve relations with the US and the EU in 2000-2003 - right after and as a consequence of the first inter-Korean summit - are highly symbolic.

Changes in the economic sphere, partly prompted by increased cooperation with the South, were most noticeable and promising for the possible evolution of the DPRK, as similar changes had led to system transformation in other socialist countries. Improvement of relations with the South made room for the DPRK leaders’ economic “experiments.” Remember, all through the 1990s, these changes were spontaneous, and it was hunger that forced North Koreans to barter and gave birth to spontaneous development of market relations. Only after the inter-Korean summit did the authorities resort to concessions, embarking on economic “measures” in July 2002 – much as a result of a hope for an increase in assistance and investment thanks to cooperation with the South.

South Korean aid largely helped to develop the market sector – its “diversion” was a major source of market supply as the products wound up in the markets.²⁹ “Shuttle merchants” deliver merchandise from abroad (mostly from China), many of them originating in South Korea, in addition to official exchanges. Marketization is already wide spread and probably cannot be curtailed by any repressive measures of the “socialist neo-conservatives.”³⁰

²⁹ - In the course of reconciliation with the South markets greatly increased in numbers and size and now number approximately 500 around the country and about 20 in Pyongyang alone.

³⁰ - Andrei Lankov, “North Korea: De-Stalinization from Below and the Advent of New Social Forces,” *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Fall 2005), www.asiaquarterly.com/content/category/5/28/43.

Meaningful processes are also in the international market-oriented sector of the economy. This could not have happened without South Korean involvement. Attempts by pragmatic elements of the DPRK leadership to create joint ventures and establish numerous free economic zones as testing grounds for new policies. The most significant was the attempt to start the Rajin-Sonbong special economic zone in 1997 through the “testament” of the late Kim Il Sung, and these were largely unsuccessful because of the lack of politically motivated investors and partners. Pure commercial motivation was not enough due to North Korea’s isolation, the closed character of its economy and the lack of trust in it, the insufficient experience, and poor decision-making capabilities of North Korean “businesspeople.” Therefore, cooperation with South Korea turned out to be the possibly single most important channel through which capitalist management could be introduced. This is more important than just profit-oriented policies, which seem to be favored by President Lee Myung-bak. South Korea in fact invests in its future. According to the summit agreements of October 2007 which are the greatest achievement of the Roh Moo-hyun government – the new projects included Mt. Paektu tourism, developing of Haeju, cargo traffic, communications in the Kaesong zone, and shipbuilding facilities in the DPRK with the ROK’s assistance. Implementation of all these projects would have substantially broadened the area of the non-communist management system in the North and would have raised the degree of marketization of the economy.

As a result largely of a decade of ‘sunshine’ policies, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea can no longer be accurately described, as is often the case, as a Stalinist country. The economy had actually changed from a centrally-planned one to a multi-sectoral one, combining the state sector (largely unoperational), the capitalist sector (joint ventures, South Korean and Chinese in the forefront, and trading companies, free economic zones), the semi-private sector (especially in agriculture and services), and the

shadow (criminalized) sector.³¹ There is growing dissatisfaction among the people and an increasing external influence. This is a natural result of a withdrawal from self-isolation and the improvement of relations with the outside world, especially South Korea. Cooperation with the South became one of the important factors strengthening the position of those quarters in Pyongyang that want change (therefore recently there was such a backlash against those who were dealing with South Koreans, from the hard-line factions). Russia fully supported the above-mentioned positive tendencies and saw inter-Korean cooperation as a major factor for the promotion of peace and development in Korea.³²

Attempts to “turn back the clock” and curtail the reforms have been periodically undertaken by the Pyongyang old guard leaders, being especially visible since 2004. A new wave, probably stronger than the previous, is recorded since the end of 2007. This tendency was aptly named “socialist neo-conservatism.”³³ Pyongyang undertook anti-market measures, and ordered that “any elements that undermine our system and corrode our socialist morality and culture and our way of life” would not be tolerated. The government has been instructed to strengthen centralized control by “concentrating all economic work in the Cabinet and organizing and carrying it out under its unified command.”³⁴ Looking back, we can suspect that these moves were triggered by the anticipated advent of the conservative administration in the South, so the authorities decided to “tighten the screws” in advance.

³¹ - For a detailed analysis see Georgy Toloraya, “The Economic Future of North Korea: Will the Market Rule?” Korea Economic Institute, *Academic Paper Series*, Vol. 2, No 10, 2007, pp. 22-40.

³² - Russian President Putin’s interview to KBS and MBC, January 26, 2001; Russian Deputy Minister Alexander Losukov’s interview, *Vreamy Novostei*, Moscow, July 23, 2003.

³³ - <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/08032.Frank.html>.

³⁴ - *Rodong Shinmun*, January 8, 2008.

Russia's Korean Policy Concept: How Does It Correlate With Seoul's Current Approach?

Developments since the end of 2007 constitute a major change in the security situation on the Korean peninsula and cause concern in other capitals, including Moscow. A deteriorating situation is not in compliance with Russian policies in Korea and Russian concepts of the desired forms of development here.

In evaluating President Lee Myung-bak's North Korean policy, Russia bases its analysis on the general principles of its Korean strategy. How can they be summarized and how do they match the Lee government policy?

- The number one Russian priority in Northeast Asia is stability and regional development in order to create the conditions for its own deeper involvement in international cooperation (especially of its Far East) and to achieve economic prosperity under secure conditions. Moscow wants to avoid any scenario which could lead to a crisis of any kind on the Korean peninsula. The current tendencies of North-South Korean tensions are not very helpful.

- Russia obviously does not want to see an unchecked increase of any foreign domination in Korea, which would endanger its interests. At the same time, it does not see the international process, comprising major powers here, as a "zero-sum game." Therefore, it advocates a cooperative approach, based both on the balance of power and the concert of power cooperation models. The idea of a regional cold-war era like division on Korean affairs (3+3) is of no appeal to Moscow. However, Seoul's intent to increase trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan would raise the possibility of just such a development.

- Russia wants its say in the decision-making process in Korean affairs in order to protect its national interests. Russia, therefore, is interested in cooperation with a more independent South Korea. Meaningful security cooperation between Russia and the two Koreas would help make the geopolitical situation in the area more balanced and predictable, because of the increase of the number of “responsible shareholders.”

- Preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, promotion of democracy, and observation of human rights, no matter how important they are declared to be to some of Russia’s partners, frankly, cannot be listed as primary goals as compared to peaceful development. Of course, Russia admits these important goals should be aspired to, but concentrating solely on them would only make their attainment more distant. These goals can be achieved only through enhancing security and peace preservation, which would help North Korea liberalize, and Seoul’s overemphasis on these aims could become counterproductive. An accent on human rights and prior denuclearization as a prerequisite for cooperation with North Korea, therefore, is not what Russia sees as constituting productive policy on the Korean peninsula.

- Many Russians consider the provision of security and the creation of conditions for development for North Korea as having the basic purpose of assisting it to change its internal and external policies. Russia believes in doing this to the extent that it would no longer be regarded as a threat or the “odd man out” as the key to an eventual solution of a vast spectrum of the problems of Korean peninsula.³⁵ That could in turn lead to liberalization of the North Korean system and more economic freedom.

³⁵-For detailed proposals see Georgi Bulychev and Alexander Vorontsov, “Korean Peninsula: Russia’s Priorities,” *Russian Analitica*, Vol. 3, December 2004, pp.58-59 (English edition).

Russia is worried that a South Korean hard-line policy could prompt the North Korean conservatives to "tighten the screws."

- Russia has always supported North-South Korean reconciliation and cooperation with the distant goal in mind of eventual reunification in some form, agreed upon by both Koreas. Such a development would not contradict Russian interests if it would result in the creation of a united, peaceful, and prosperous Korea that is friendly to Russia. Such a country would be one of the most important partners for Russia in Asia, helping to build a more balanced system of international relations in the Far East. However, Russia is against "overnight" unification and attempts to alienate and pressure North Korea, the danger of which has increased as a result of current Seoul's policy.

- Russia successfully avoided being drawn into the inter-Korean confrontation on either side in the 1990s. Current tensions between North and South Korea could encourage both Koreas to seek Russian support for their respective positions, which would make diplomacy more difficult. At the same time, Russia's aspirations to become a "Eurasian bridge," which will speed up the development of its Far Eastern regions and facilitate its deeper integration in the Asian economic space, would wane as the prospects of trilateral projects (in railway transportation and energy sector) would dim. Other economic projects, first and foremost trilateral ones, would have to be shelved. Russia is worried that the investments already made into some of these projects (like building the railroad between the Russian border and port of Rajin and of a container terminal in Rajin) may suffer.³⁶

³⁶- The project of reconstructing the Trans-Korean railroad (TKR) with a linkage to the Russian Trans-Siberian Railway (TSR or Transsib) in the interest of smooth rail transit from the East Asian tip to Europe can be, without exaggeration, called epochal for Russia and the Korean peninsula countries, turned into an Asia-Europe transit corridor

- Russia is interested in smooth multiparty cooperation between the major powers on Korea. Korean problems became an important item on the Russian global agenda and also in the field of Russian international relations. Russia also thinks that the eventual creation of a regional (sub-regional) system of security and cooperation in Northeast Asia would benefit Russia, as it would create more opportunities for promotion of its interests and raise the degree of predictability in this area. Institutionalization of the Northeast Asian security and cooperation mechanism might play an important role in a changeover from contentions based on mutual deterrence to a system of cooperation/ competition grounded in the balance of interests, i.e., in a 'concert of powers.' However, the effectiveness of the six-party talks as a mechanism for change could be endangered with the current resurgence of tensions in Korean peninsula.

In the Kim Young Sam government era, Moscow was not happy with the casual disregard paid to the Russian role in Korean affairs and general neglect for its interests. Russian government and experts alike were deeply upset by being excluded both from the KEDO in 1990s and the four-party talks. In 1996, they learned (actually by chance) that Russian economic and political positions have strengthened since that time and resurgence of a similar situation would be hardly welcomed.

competitive with the freight way by sea with the same destination through the Suez Canal, Russian transport experts argue. One of its advantages is the chance to transport cargoes over more than 10,000 km under a unified transport legislation without actually crossing state borders. The Trans-Korean railroad would carry Russian, DPRK's, and South Korean freight, and transit cargos from the Republic of Korea to European countries and back. A part of container cargos from Japan handled in the port of Pusan could also be redirected to the Trans-Korean railroad. In 2008 a joint venture was established for modernization of the railway section from the crossing point of Khasan to the North Korean port of Rajin (worth about 1.75 bln rubles according to Russian estimates), the construction of a container terminal in Rajin on a joint basis – as a new significant transit section for transshipping goods proceeding from Northeast Asian countries to Russia by Transsib connection and further to Europe. "The Trans-Korean Railroad," A. B. Bardal, *Problems of the Far East*, No. 4, 2007 (in Russian), www.rzd.ru.

In the initial stages of Lee Myung-bak administration, Russia tried to make it clear its desire to seriously discuss the possibilities for improving the situation on the Korean peninsula by promoting peaceful dialogue and policies of taking into account North Korean's concerns. However, South Koreans insisted that peace and security could only be achieved with prior denuclearization of North Korea and shied away from accepting Russian logic of the promotion of cooperation with North Korea. Rep. Lee Jae-oh, President Lee's envoy to Russia, noted in January 2008 that "Russian officials expressed support for the president-elect's plan to forge a prosperous Northeast Asian economic community, especially as it will help in persuading North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons."³⁷

The Lee Myung-bak administration has so far failed to deepen cooperation with Russia on the North Korean issue: South Korean experts admit that "while the triangular alliance of the US-ROK-Japan has been strengthened with the inauguration of the Lee Myung-bak administration, diplomacy with Russia is restricted to only the field of energy and natural resources discussions."³⁸ Russia, in the meantime, suggested that a committee as a communication channel between Seoul and Moscow to closely cooperate on the development of the Far East region be formed.³⁹ However, initiatives to that effect remain distant. In the same way, the creation of and implementation of a trilateral committee (Russia-North Korea-South Korea) for discussions of issues related to economic cooperation⁴⁰ seem to be an equally distant prospect.

Russia is concerned that the ROK conservative government might pay less attention to Moscow's interests, and, because of a deepening cooperation with the US conservative-minded policy circles, may share a logic that sees

³⁷ - *Korea Herald*, January 28, 2008.

³⁸ - Ryu Jin-sook, "Putin and Lee Myung-Bak Sharing One Bed with Two Different Dreams?" *Korean Institute for Future Strategies Bulletin*, March 18, 2008.

³⁹ - *Korea Herald*, January 28, 2008.

⁴⁰ - <http://www.nr2.ru/policy/159873.html>.

the Russian role as that of merely an "interested observer," or merely supporting China on principal issues in Korean affairs, not playing an independent role.⁴¹ Washington is not happy with Russian statements that North Korea and the US share the fault for the 2008 stalling of the six-party talks⁴² and that cannot but influence the ROK position and limit the possibilities for cooperation.

Hopefully these views won't prevail. A joint study of the US and South Korean experts came to more balanced conclusions: "Russia has pursued fairly non-controversial policy objectives toward the Korean peninsula: nuclear non-proliferation and the maintenance of peace and stability on the peninsula; support for inter-Korean dialogues and interactions contributing to a peaceful reunification; expansion of mutually beneficial economic cooperation; and trying to obtain greater Korean involvement in developing Siberia and the Russian Far East... Moscow has attempted to enhance its role as a serious "broker" with North Korea..."⁴³

Are there still possibilities for Moscow-Seoul cooperation vis-à-vis the North Korean problem?

For one thing, Russia would not welcome a repetition of the situation seen in the 1990s, when South Korean representatives kept on urging the Russian government to exert pressure on Pyongyang and demanded information on Pyongyang's possible reactions and plans. At the same time, Russia would welcome a relaxation of tensions and deepening cooperation

41- Russia is already being blamed by the US to be inactive in responding to the new Lee Myung-bak administration's initiatives in economic (especially energy and transportation) sphere, and said to do little to help North Korea overcome its isolation. Ambassador Vershbow's presentation in Korea Economic Institute, January 31, 2008.

42- In February 2008, Deputy Minister Alexander Losukov blamed not only "lack of information about the DPRK's nuclear programs" but also "US failure to perform its obligations to exclude the DPRK from the list of the countries that sponsor terrorism" for the halt in the six-party talks. "Russian Diplomat Names Reasons For Halt In Six-Sided N. Korean Nuclear Talks," *Itar-Tass*, Tokyo, February 2, 2008.

43- The Search for a Common Strategic Vision: Charting the Future of the US-ROK Security Partnership, *A Report of the US-ROK Strategic Forum*, February 2008, sponsored by the SK group and the East Asia Foundation, <http://www.wm.edu/news/?id=8681>.

between North and South Korea and could render assistance to these efforts from both sides of the 38th parallel if needed.

- Russia is interested in a denuclearized Korean peninsula as much as the ROK. The most important practical task now is to promote the six-party diplomatic process, and the implementation of commitments from all the parties. Even if the most optimistic expectations were not fully realized, the process should be patiently continued. Any progress in dismantling North Korean nuclear programs is welcome and should be supported, not the least by assuring North Koreans that this would not constitute a lessening in their security. The South Korean role in this is indispensable and Seoul could always count on Russian support of such intentions and on bringing the message home to North Koreans.
- Russia would like to solicit the ROK's support and expertise (both within and outside the working group created in the framework of the six-party talks) in promotion of the creation of the regional peace and cooperation architecture. The ROK, as a 'middle power,' could greatly benefit from institutionalization of a regional Northeast Asian security mechanism (I would even dare propose that its headquarters should be located in Seoul, as a 'neutral' place). The ROK has already presented various considerations and valuable ideas about these prospects - such activity should be brought to the attention of the political leadership and promoted in every possible way.
- Coordination of economic issues related to economic assistance and development of North Korea between Moscow and Seoul also appears promising. Russia has vested economic interests in the Korean peninsula and especially in the field of trilateral cooperation, such as the transportation and energy sectors. Russian experts note with satisfaction that

ROK government representatives recently stress the importance of three-party cooperation in developing the resources of the Russian Far East and in other areas.⁴⁴ A pragmatic approach by President Lee Myung-bak could be very useful for starting meaningful cooperation. The pilot project to be supported by both the Russian and Korean governments is the Rajin-Khasan railroad project with participation of the three countries. In the future, other trilateral projects – a railroad connection to Transsib, Russian corporate participation in the reconstruction of North Korean energy and parts of the industrial sector and supply of energy, as well as South and North Korean participation (including the use of North Korean labor)⁴⁵ in developing Far Eastern mineral resources are to be promoted.

- Therefore, it is obvious that increased policy coordination through political, diplomatic, and track II channels is needed and the momentum should not be lost with the change of administration. The change of government in Seoul brought about confusion as to expectations within the Russian community of experts as to what the developments in South Korea under the new government will be. It looks like Russian Korean policy is not fully understood by the current South Korean government, and at the same time, Russian experts cannot fully grasp the rationale behind Seoul's current policy line. There is still a need to build trust as to the intentions of both parties and plans in the Korean peninsula, which, for Russia, remains an important neighboring area.

⁴⁴- Adress of Former Foreign Minister Yoo Chong Ha to the 9th Korea-Russian Forum, Moscow, May 29, 2008.

⁴⁵- Lee Sung Kyu, Energy Security in Northeast Asia and Trilateral Russia-South Korea-North Korea Energy Cooperation, presented at the 9th Korea-Russian Forum, Moscow, May 29, 2008.

We hope that pragmatism will help the Lee Myung-bak government overcome their initial "childishly" radical and overly ideologically rigid approach, taking into account not just ideals and desires but practical realities. There are already signs that the ROK government is taking a more flexible and responsible stance with regard to its North Korean policy, for example, on the issue of providing humanitarian food aid unconditionally, and trying to sustain the working-level dialogue with Pyongyang. It is worth noting that some South Korean experts suggested that the Lee Myung-bak administration, just as the Bush administration followed an "Anything But Clinton" policy in its early days, is doing exactly the same regarding the policy of Roh Moo-hyun and continued: "I believe that, sooner or later, the Lee Myung-bak administration can go back to the Sunshine Policy."⁴⁶ Let us hope the US conservative administration's experience in the years from 2000 to 2006 can serve as a lesson to President Lee Myung-bak and that he can return to a more pragmatic policy much sooner than the former did. Such a move would create the prerequisites needed for a broader level of cooperation between Moscow and Seoul in Korean affairs and would benefit Russia, South and North Korea alike.

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⁴⁶-Jeong Se-Hyun, "Lee Myung-Bak Administration Can Also Go Back To Sunshine Policy," *Tongil News*, April 23, 2008.

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