

Russian Policy toward North Korea: Steadfast and Changing*

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This paper reviews how, during the last few years, Russia has undertaken a sustained campaign to bolster its economic presence and diplomatic influence in Pyongyang. This campaign has resulted in many bilateral agreements and the launching of several economic projects. However, Russia has found it as difficult as the other DPRK interlocutors to develop influence in Pyongyang, while many of the economic projects remain unimplemented, underdeveloped, or underperforming. If successful, Russia's commercial and diplomatic engagement could temper Pyongyang's problematic external and internal behavior by reassuring its leadership, while also discouraging the DPRK from testing more nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles for fear of alienating Moscow. Or Russian support could boost North Korea's military-industrial potential, weaken the DPRK's diplomatic isolation, embolden more Pyongyang's provocations, reduce Beijing's willingness to pressure Pyongyang due to North Korea's having alternative Russian options, and delay unification by helping prolong the existence of an odious regime that tortures its own people and threatens the world.

Keywords: Russia, Vladimir Putin, Moscow, six-party talks, Kim Jong-un

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the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to develop influence in Pyongyang, while many of the economic projects remain unimplemented, underdeveloped, or underperforming.

Interestingly, Russia's goals regarding North Korea have been changing. Moscow's commercial and diplomatic engagement still aims to temper the DPRK's problematic external behavior by reassuring its leadership while also giving Pyongyang a stake in not alienating Russia or others through further provocations. In addition to these long-standing Russian objectives, Moscow has more recently been improving relations with the DPRK as an important component of its broader, regionwide "turn to Asia" policy designed to improve Russia's integration into East Asia's dynamic economic processes, to include non-Chinese partners. The deepening Russia-Western tensions following Moscow's March 2014 annexation of Crimea have now resulted in a growing aversion in Moscow to the possible collapse of the DPRK and Seoul-led Korean unification, which Russian policymakers fear could result in geopolitical disadvantages for their country. This change has moved Moscow's position closer to the People's Republic of China (PRC), whose government has also decided, despite evidence of some rethinking a few years ago, that preservation of the DPRK regime and Korea's division benefit Beijing's regional objectives more than the likely consequences of a Seoul-led Korean unification scenario.

Thus, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the United States should regard cautiously Moscow's deepening ties with North Korea. In theory, these ties, like those between China and the DPRK, could hopefully give Pyongyang an incentive to avoid further regional provocations if Moscow convinced Pyongyang not to risk these ties through bad behavior. However, the renewed Russian-DPRK partnership might also boost North Korea's military-industrial potential, weaken the DPRK's diplomatic isolation and therefore incentive to engage with Western partners, embolden Pyongyang's risk-taking, reduce Beijing's leverage and willingness to pressure Pyongyang due to North Korea's having alternative Russian options, and delay unification by helping prolong the existence of an odious regime that tortures its people and threatens the world.

Elements of Continuity

During the last few years, the Russian government, following years of low-level engagement, has sustained a high-profile economic and diplomatic effort, led by President Vladimir Putin, to deepen ties with the DPRK and other Asian countries.¹ Russian officials have made critical concessions to resolve the Soviet debt issue that prevented new Russian-DPRK economic projects and announced various new bilateral and regional investment and transportation projects involving the two countries. In the realm of diplomacy, in 2014, Russia hosted more senior DPRK leaders than any other foreign country, ranging from North Korea's titular president to the DPRK foreign minister to the second-most senior North Korean official. Notwithstanding the recent activism, this article shows how Moscow's objectives regarding North Korea have remained fairly constant during the past two decades. These goals include averting another major war on the Korean Peninsula;² preventing DPRK actions from prompting additional countries to obtain nuclear weapons or ballistic missiles;³ keeping Moscow a major player in Korean affairs and East Asia more broadly by strengthening Russian leverage in Asia;⁴ building transportation and energy corridors through the Korean Peninsula that would deepen Russia's regional economic integration;⁵ and freezing and eventually eliminating the DPRK's nuclear program by exclusively peaceful means.

Russian policymakers do not want North Korea to have nuclear weapons. Although Russians only consider the DPRK's nuclear pro-

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1. Doug Bandow, "Russia and North Korea Play Nice: Vladimir Putin's Ukrainian Dance with Kim Jong-un," *The World Post*, March 24, 2015.
 2. Shannon Tiezzi, "The Renaissance in Russia-North Korea Relations," *The Diplomat*, November 22, 2014.
 3. "Russia, North Korea Aim to Sign Defense Deal to Prevent Dangerous Activity," *Sputnik*, June 23, 2015.
 4. Eric Talmadge, "Why Russia Is Bolstering Ties with North Korea," *The Guardian*, August 4, 2014.
 5. "Russia, China Could Open Rail Link via N. Korea This Year," *RIA Novosti*, April 22, 2009.

gram an indirect threat, seeing no reason it would strike at Russia,⁶ and doubt North Koreans would ever act on their rhetoric and use nuclear weapons against the United States or South Korea, they worry that Pyongyang's belligerent and erratic behavior combined with more progress in nuclear weapons development could precipitate a war through miscalculation with the ROK and the United States (on Russia's border), fear the potential for misfired DPRK missiles striking Russian territory, and are concerned about the DPRK's WMD proliferation activities, which have encompassed countries and non-state actors potentially unfriendly to Moscow. In addition, Russian policymakers fear how the DPRK's active pursuit of nuclear arms and ballistic missiles could promote the further proliferation of such technologies. In particular, Moscow wants to prevent the DPRK's actions from encouraging the ROK, Japan, and other states to pursue their own offensive and defensive strategic weapons, especially nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and ballistic missile defenses, since these capabilities might be used to reduce the effectiveness of Russia's strike weapons. In the current atmosphere of Russia-West tensions, Russian analysts even view defensive military cooperation among South Korea, Japan, and the United States warily, expressing concern that Washington is trying to construct the same kind of regional military bloc that the U.S. leads in Europe, a Pacific version of the NATO alliance in Northeast Asia.⁷

Russian leaders have generally agreed with China that the negotiations aimed at constraining North Korea's nuclear arsenal should begin as soon as possible without any preconditions since talks are better than sanctions let alone military action and, in the words of Putin, "If we constantly set preconditions for the start of talks, they may never

begin."⁸ Russia's role in the recent Iran nuclear deal, which has not adversely affected Tehran's ties with Moscow, could convince many Russian leaders that Moscow might aid in the denuclearization of North Korea without sacrificing its economic and diplomatic ties with Pyongyang by contributing to a possible DPRK reconciliation with the West. However, while Moscow might accept Pyongyang's proposal to resume the multilateral six-party talks on Korean denuclearization without preconditions, the United States and South Korea insist that North Korea must provide credible evidence that it will fulfill its obligation to end its nuclear weapons program in a verifiable manner.

Despite the novelty of Moscow's recent activism regarding North Korea, Russian policymakers have also consistently employed several strategies and tactics regarding the DPRK. For example, they have sought to engage the DPRK in dialogue, especially through the six-party talks, while minimizing use of coercion and punishment that might harden Pyongyang's stance or trigger abrupt regime collapse. A failed DPRK state could bring about widespread economic disruptions in East Asia, propel large refugee flights into or near Russia, weaken Moscow's influence in both halves of the Korean Peninsula, and remove a buffer zone separating Russia from U.S. forces based in the ROK. To sustain a prominent role in the diplomatic maneuverings regarding the Korea nuclear issue until then, Russian representatives participate in joint declarations on the issue, regularly send senior Russian officials to the Koreas, and advocate dealing with Korean security issues within the framework of the six-party talks, bilateral Korean engagements, and the UN Security Council (UNSC) rather than rely primarily on Beijing's and Washington's direct dialogues with Pyongyang or bilateral Chinese-U.S. engagement.

There have been some recent innovations in Moscow's strategy and tactics regarding North Korea due to the worsening ties between Russia and the West and an assessment that the Pyongyang regime is politically stable and more eager to engage with Russia economically

6. Russia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "North Korea's Nuclear Program Does Not Threaten Russia" (in Russian), November 23, 2014, http://www.rusdialog.ru/news/9869_1416638139.

7. Alexander Zhebin, remarks at "Russia and the Korean Peninsula: Policy and Investment Implications," YouTube videos, 1:18:27, posted by "Center for Strategic & International Studies," May 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2ZCGZBVVrc>.

8. Vladimir Putin, Interview to Korean Broadcasting System, Kremlin website, November 12, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19603>.

and diplomatically due to the DPRK's strained relations with China, the United States, and South Korea. For example, Russian officials show less concern about the DPRK's current nuclear activities and evince less support, even in principle, for unification under Seoul's leadership.⁹ Since Russians consider the likelihood of either abrupt regime collapse or a DPRK nuclear weapons breakthrough any time soon remote, they no longer aim for a "soft landing" of the North Korean regime in which Pyongyang voluntarily surrenders its nuclear weapons and transforms its domestic and foreign policies in return for foreign economic assistance and security assurances. Instead of gradual regime change, they aim to change the regime's policies. One Russian expert has described this new goal as "conventionalizing" North Korea through a process of evolutionary but limited internal reforms and gradual changes in the DPRK's international behavior to resemble that of a normal country. These changing Russian goals and tactics, while offering insights on Moscow's current approach to international affairs, have failed to have much impact on Korean affairs yet or even achieve a major breakthrough in Moscow's economic or strategic ties with Pyongyang due primarily to North Korea's limited capacity for any foreign partnerships. However, Russia's new course might become more important should North Korea ever show greater interest in negotiating on unification, nuclear disarmament, or regional economic integration.

Background

Russian policymakers perceive that they made a mistake during the 1990s when they let relations with the DPRK atrophy — ironically, this reduced Russia's appeal to South Korea, who formerly saw

Moscow as a potential mediator with Pyongyang. Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, sought to reverse many of his predecessor's foreign policies. An early priority was restoring Russia's influence in East Asia, including North Korea, as part of Putin's broader ambition to re-establish Russia as a great power. Whereas Yeltsin's government shunned Pyongyang in an effort to court Seoul, the Putin administration pursued more balanced relations, engaging with both Koreas to enhance Moscow's leverage with all the parties active in Korean affairs.¹⁰ Although Russia's economic role in the ROK lags behind that of China and the United States, Moscow's ties with the DPRK and its membership in the six-party talks and the UN Security Council have given Russia greater leverage over Seoul. But until recently, Russia's influence in North Korea remained as marginal as that of the other foreign powers.

It has only been since Kim Jong-un took charge in Pyongyang following the abrupt death of his father, Kim Jong-il, in December 2011, and subsequently alienated China and other potential partners, that Moscow has had an opportunity to become Pyongyang's preferred diplomatic partner. Although Russian goals, strategy, and tactics regarding North Korea have remained fairly constant, their consequences have changed due to Kim's policy of seeking to improve relations with Moscow to compensate for his difficulties with Beijing and other countries. Moscow has since hosted more North Korean leaders — ranging from the country's titular president to its foreign minister to the second-most senior DPRK official — in recent years than ever in Russian history. These visits, especially prominent in 2014, also stand out given how senior DPRK leaders have shunned other potential foreign destinations. In addition to these leadership visits, Russian-North Korean diplomatic collaboration has manifested itself in mutu-

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

10. Institute of history, archaeology, and ethnography of the peoples of the far-east, far-eastern branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, "The Problem of the Korean Peninsula in the Context of Russia's Integration into the Asia-Pacific Region" (in Russian), *informacionno-analiticheskij bjulleten'* [Information-analytical Bulletin] no. 10 (208), February 5, 2009, p. 4, http://www.ihaefe.org/pacific_ocean_map/10.pdf.

ally supportive statements, such as Pyongyang's backing Moscow's position regarding Crimea, Russia blocking UN resolutions that would punish DPRK leaders for their human rights abuses, and their joint opposition to U.S.-ROK missile defense cooperation.

The Russian government has tried to consolidate its diplomatic advantage in 2015, beginning with the announcement of a "Year of Friendship" between the two countries.¹¹ In April, a meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific, and Technological Cooperation considered proposals for bilateral cooperation in agriculture, energy, tourism, and infrastructure.¹² Then, with greater fanfare, the Russian government invited Kim to Moscow to take part in the May 2015 Victory Day celebrations marking the 70th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II.¹³ Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov said such a visit "would be a logical continuation of a recently noticeably activated Russian-North Korean political dialogue [and] would contribute to the implementation of agreements reached by the parties in the economic field" and would additionally contribute to "peace on the Korean Peninsula, as well as Northeast Asia."¹⁴ Through this initiative, Russia also tried to demonstrate that it retains considerable diplomatic influence despite Western efforts to isolate Moscow. In a November 23, 2014, interview with the Russian Tass News Agency, Putin insisted that Moscow would not allow itself to become internationally isolated behind a new "Iron Curtain." "We understand the fatality of an 'Iron Curtain' for us," Putin told Tass. "We will not go down this path in any case and no one will build a wall around us. That is impossible!"¹⁵ Having Kim sit

11. Justin McCurry, "North Korea and Russia Forge 'Year of Friendship' Pariah Alliance," *The Guardian*, March 12, 2015.

12. Akanksha Sharma, "Time to Tap Russia and China on North Korea Denuclearization," *East Asia Forum*, August 15, 2015, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/08/15/time-to-tap-russia-and-china-on-north-korean-denuclearisation/>.

13. Eric Talmadge, "North Korea's Kim Jong Un Mulls Russia for His World Debut," Yahoo News, January 14, 2015.

14. "Kim Jong Un Moscow Visit Continuation of Russia, North Korea Dialogue," Sputnik, January 28, 2015.

15. "Putin Says Russia is Not Isolated—TASS," Reuters, November 23, 2014.

near Putin during the celebration would have provided the Russian state media with a means to distract Russians from the situation in Ukraine, the international sanctions on Russia, Russians' economic difficulties and diplomatic isolation, as well as the likely absence of other foreign leaders at the event. If South Korean President Park had come, Putin could have tried his hand at high-profile personal diplomacy between the Korean leaders.

But the hoped-for visit, which would have marked the reclusive DPRK leader's first official state visit abroad, failed to materialize.¹⁶ Kim Yong-nam, the symbolic North Korean head of state and president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, attended instead in a move that fulfilled the letter but not the spirit of the DPRK's pledge to send a senior representative to the event.¹⁷ Possible reasons for his absence include his preoccupation with domestic power struggles in Pyongyang, Kim's disinterest in being just one of many leaders in Moscow for the occasion, a reluctance to embarrass Beijing by having the first meeting between the heads of China and North Korea occur in Russia, and the Russian government's decision to announce a likely visit of Kim despite the DPRK leaders' traditional aversion to revealing their movements in advance and claims by North Koreans that their commitment was simply to send a leader, not the leader, to the event.¹⁸ Although Russian officials and analysts have denied that the misfired visit has set back ties, especially since so many Western leaders including President Park skipped the event, the senior diplomatic exchanges between the two countries appear to have lost some momentum.

16. Shannon Tiezzi, "North Korea's Kim Jong-un Cancels Trip to Russia," *The Diplomat*, April 30, 2015; Andrew Roth, "Kim Jong-un Won't Attend World War II Celebration in Moscow," *New York Times*, April 30, 2015.

17. Alexei Nikolsky, "North Korea's Titular Head of State to Visit Moscow Instead of Kim Jong Un," Reuters, May 3, 2015.

18. Julian Ryall, "Kim Jong-un Sends Head of State to Russia in His Place," *The Telegraph*, May 4, 2015.

Moscow's Security Calculus

Russian officials generally agree that the world would be better if North Korea were not to develop a nuclear weapons arsenal, but they differ with Western governments on the best strategy and tactics to avoid such an adverse outcome as well as on the relative severity and urgency of this threat. In particular, they believe that it would take many more years for the DPRK to develop an operational nuclear weapons capacity. Even if it has nuclear weapons, Russians doubt the DPRK would ever use them except for deterrence and self-defense. This assumption makes them question the logic and often the motives of U.S. and ROK policies that focus on this issue and entail a counter-vailing military buildup, to include the missile defenses so strongly opposed by Moscow.

Russian policymakers want to prevent the DPRK's actions from encouraging other countries — such as South Korea, Japan, and perhaps other states — through emulation or for defensive reasons to pursue their own offensive and defensive strategic weapons, especially nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and ballistic missile defenses, since these capabilities might, under some contingencies, be used against Russian forces. Russian leaders have also sought to constrain North Korea's testing of long-range ballistic missiles because of their proximity to Russian territory and their inaccuracy. Yet, at the end of the day, Russian strategists consider a nuclear-armed DPRK as only an indirect threat, since they do not foresee any reason why North Korea would attack Russia or any other country, and are therefore unwilling to incur major risks or costs to try to force the North Koreans to renounce their nuclear weapons ambitions or to replace the current DPRK regime with a more pliable government.¹⁹

Russian officials oppose strong sanctions on the DPRK that could precipitate North Korea's collapse into a failed state. They seek to

change Pyongyang's behavior, but not its regime. Moscow remains more concerned about the DPRK's collapse than Pyongyang's intransigence regarding its nuclear and missile development programs or the other problems presented by its obnoxious and inscrutable leadership. Disintegration of the North Korean regime could induce widespread economic disruptions in East Asia, generate large refugee flows across Russia's borders, weaken Moscow's influence in the Korean Peninsula by ending its unique status as interlocutor with Pyongyang, and potentially remove a buffer zone separating Russia from U.S. ground forces based in South Korea. At worst, North Korea's demise could precipitate a military conflict on the peninsula — which could spill across into Russian territory. Even if the fighting occurred exclusively in North Korea, almost any conceivable armed clash on the Korean Peninsula would worsen Russian security. If a war broke out on the Korean Peninsula and any of the combatants attacked, either intentionally or accidentally, or sabotaged any of the nuclear sites in North and South Korea, it could cause a devastating nuclear accident that could dwarf either Chernobyl or Fukushima, which would potentially affect the Russian Far East as well as Russia's Asian neighbors and markets.²⁰ If unification occurred through ROK-U.S. military occupation of the North, much of the ROK investment flowing into Russia would be redirected toward North Korea's rehabilitation.

Russians' general aversion to sanctioning North Korea and other states of proliferation concern is longstanding. Russian diplomats typically oppose using sanctions to punish foreign governments. In the case of the DPRK, Russian policymakers argue that a non-coercive, incentive-based strategy offers the best means for persuading Pyongyang to denuclearize. Even more than in the case of Iran, Russian officials worry that using sanctions could antagonize Pyongyang to the point that it lashes back, unpredictably and destructively, in anger. As one of the five permanent UN Security Council members, Russia can veto all decisions by that body, and Moscow has wielded this

19. Artyom Lukin, "Russia Shows Little Concern Over North Korea Nukes (for now)," *East Asia Forum*, March 3, 2013, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/03/03/russia-shows-little-concern-over-north-korean-nukes-for-now/>.

20. "Korean War Unlikely, But Risks for Russia Serious," RIA Novosti, April 9, 2013.

power to block proposed UN resolutions that would have imposed severe international sanctions on the DPRK or authorized the use of force to compel DPRK compliance with UNSC resolutions. Russian officials also oppose the unilateral sanctions adopted by the United States, South Korea, and other countries on North Korea. Among other negative effects, these limit the resources available to Russian-backed regional economic projects. Russian analysts also believe that the sanctions contribute to North Korea's isolation and hardline approach towards other countries, whereas a relaxation of the sanctions would decrease North Korean belligerence. They further argue that the human rights situation in North Korea, which they acknowledge is terrible even though it is not a Russian priority, is impervious to direct foreign pressure to ameliorate.²¹

Yet, Russian officials will sometimes agree to impose limited sanctions on the DPRK as a "lesser evil" than doing nothing, applying much more severe sanctions, or using force. In addition, Moscow has supported some UN punitive measures to ensure that the UNSC remains an important actor in the international community's response to the Korea issue. Russian diplomats fear a repeat of Kosovo (1998) and Iraq (2003) examples, when Western governments decided to bypass the UN and employ force on their own initiative, through "coalitions of the willing," after they could not work through the UNSC due to Moscow's veto. Russian diplomats must balance blocking harsh UN sanctions while sustaining Western interests in working through the UN. The experience of Iraq, Kosovo, and Syria shows that, if Moscow blocked all Western-backed measures against the DPRK in the UN, the Western powers could simply pursue collective measures outside the United Nations.

Moscow's influence in the Koreas is constrained by its generally low diplomatic and economic weight in East Asia. Russian officials constantly fear being shunted aside in the Korea peace and security

21. Georgy Toloraya, "Russia and the Two Koreas: Old Friends, New Partners?" presentation at Korea Economic Institute of America, June 11, 2015, <http://www.keia.org/event/russia-and-two-koreas-old-friends-new-partners>.

dialogue, despite what they see as Moscow's obvious interest in the results. Although the Russian Federation is physically a Pacific country, few East Asians perceive it as a major regional player due to Russia's traditional focus on Europe and the weak political and economic ties between Russia and East Asian countries.²²

To combat these perceptions, Russian policymakers strive to maintain a high-profile in regional diplomatic efforts and a central role in the six-party talks, a framework that, like the United Nations, substantiates Moscow's claims to great power status in negotiating East Asian security issues. Russian policymakers have also sought to mediate Korean security disputes by playing up their country's good relations with both Koreas. Russian diplomacy has pursued a similar strategy in the Middle East, justifying Russia's ties with Iran, Hamas, and other controversial actors by citing Moscow's value for preserving lines of communication and opportunities for mediation among the parties in conflict. Moscow's most successful intervention to further the talks came when it helped North Korea recover USD 25 million deposited in Macao's Banco Delta Asia.²³ Nonetheless, Russia has not enjoyed enough influence in either region to broker a settlement.

The Russian government has declared its intent to increase strategic cooperation with the DPRK. For example, in February 2015, Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, said that the two militaries would hold joint drills later in 2015, but this has yet to occur.²⁴ Russia has proposed signing a treaty this year with North Korea on mutual legal assistance in criminal matters and an agreement on preventing dangerous military activities.²⁵

Another way that Russia has affirmed its role in Korean security

22. "South Korea to Develop New Arms in Response to North Korean Nuclear Program," Sputnik, January 20, 2015.

23. "\$20 mln of North Korea's Funds Transferred from Macao Bank-1," RIA Novosti, June 14, 2007.

24. "Russia Plans Joint Military Drills with N. Korea," *Chosun Ilbo*, February 2, 2015.

25. "Russia, North Korea Aim to Sign Defense Deal to Prevent Dangerous Activity," Sputnik, June 23, 2015.

affairs and bolstered its international status is by referring to the DPRK nuclear issue and related security questions in joint statements with other governments. By making such joint declarations, Russia's dialogue partners affirm Moscow's role as a legitimate player on the Korea issue. China is a favorite Russian partner in this enterprise given the overlapping perspective in Moscow and Beijing on many Korean security issues. Until recently, Russian and U.S. leaders have cited their cooperation in managing the North Korean nuclear dispute as evidence that, despite their many bilateral differences, the two governments can continue to work together in solving important international security issues.²⁶

Still, while criticizing the DPRK for testing nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles, Russian government representatives have also faulted Western countries for failing to meet their previous commitments to North Korea, implying that this failure might have precipitated Pyongyang's uncooperative behavior. In October 2014, for instance, the Russian Foreign Ministry chastised Washington for impeding the resumption of the six-party talks: "If the American side takes adequate steps and makes the effort, not just claims, to North Korea to meet one-sided requirements, we will definitely welcome it," an anonymous official told the Russian media.²⁷ The exchanges regarding North Korea have not yet helped Russia break out of its diplomatic isolation, except that the Russian and Japanese foreign ministries have launched a formal dialogue on North Korea-related issues.²⁸

26. The United States, Office of the White House Press Secretary, "Joint Statement by President Dmitriy Medvedev of the Russian Federation and President Barack Obama of the United States of America," April 1, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-Statement-by-President-Dmitriy-Medvedev-of-the-Russian-Federation-and-President-Barack-Obama-of-the-United-States-of-America.

27. "Russia Would Welcome US Steps to Resume Nuclear Talks With North Korea: Foreign Ministry," RIA Novosti, October 22, 2014.

28. "Russian and Japanese Foreign Ministries to Discuss the 'North Korean Issue'," Sputnik, January 22, 2015.

Economic Drivers and Impediments

In addition to their security concerns, Russian officials are eager to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula and promote stability in the North to integrate Russia better into the prosperous East Asian region. They hope that closer ties with the Koreans and other Asian countries would facilitate Asian investment and technology transfers to Russia that would help modernize their economy and benefit Russian consumers and exporters.²⁹ Even before the West imposed economic sanctions on Russia following Moscow's March 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the Russian government (in what has been called "Putin's Pivot") has been striving to deepen its economic ties with the prosperous Asian region by shipping more energy eastward, joining Asian institutions, and encouraging more Asian investment into Russia.³⁰ Since the West began imposing sanctions, Russians have redoubled their Asian rebalancing, which Russians hope will build non-Western economic ties and show the West that Moscow can circumvent the sanctions by seeking new partners in Asia (and the Middle East). However, Russia's economic integration in East Asia remains limited and what progress that Moscow has achieved in that region has almost exclusively been with China rather than Japan, South Korea, or North Korea.

This is not Moscow's intent. Some Russians have even ambitiously hoped to use better ties with North Korea as a springboard for increasing Russian relations with other Asian countries.³¹ In support of this objective, Russian officials have made critical concessions to resolve the Soviet debt issue that prevented new bilateral and regional investment and transportation projects. The Russian and DPRK governments have also developed plans to reconstruct North Korea's railroad net-

29. "North Korea Seeks Closer Russia Ties," *Korea Herald*, July 2, 2014.

30. Fiona Hill and Bobo Lo, "Putin's Pivot: Why Russia Is Looking East," *Foreign Affairs*, July 31, 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2013-07-31/putins-pivot>.

31. Gevorg Mirzayan, "Why Russia needs North Korea," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, July 6, 2015.

work and connect it to that of Russia, build a natural gas pipeline and electricity power lines between their countries through the Korean Peninsula, and develop North Korea's possibly extensive mineral riches. The idea of connecting the Trans-Siberian and Trans-Korean railroads, if realized, would create the longest Euro-Asian land transportation corridor, with a length of more than 10,000 kilometers. Experts believe that the corridor will reduce the time needed for containers to move from East Asia to Europe from six weeks by sea to less than two weeks by rail.³² In addition, there have been talks of a new road to be constructed between the two countries.³³ A trans-Peninsula road might benefit the North Korean people more than a railway since the truck drivers and other road vehicle operators and passengers would be more likely than railway users to stop inside North Korea and purchase goods and services there.

In its initiatives, Russia has tried to deepen economic ties with both Korean states separately as well as to encourage trilateral economic cooperation between them. The DPRK government has supported this drive since Pyongyang wants to increase its foreign economic engagement, also partly impeded by Western economic sanctions, in general and reduce its dependence on the Chinese economy in particular. The South Korean government has also supported Russia's economic strategy in principle since, provided they do not violate South Korean sanctions, some Russian projects would help achieve President Park Geun-hye's Eurasia Initiative of deepening ties between South Korea and the Eurasian countries in the former Soviet bloc.

Russian-DPRK economic engagement has made some progress. In the first half of 2014, the Russian parliament and president approved the 2012 agreement to write off 90 percent of the DPRK's USD 10.94 billion Soviet-era debt (valued as of September 2012), except for USD 1.09 billion that Pyongyang would pay in semiannual installments over the next twenty years, of which the Russian government has

agreed to contribute to a fund to support bilateral economic infrastructure projects.³⁴ Meanwhile, a Russian-DPRK joint venture to upgrade the Rajin port into a transshipment center for Northeast Asia at North Korea's northernmost ice-free port continues to attract interest among South Korean businesses, with the ROK government waiving the application of the economic sanctions adopted following the 2010 provocations.³⁵ In 2014, a preliminary shipment of Russian coal was sent from the Rajin port to the ROK, to test the feasibility of establishing a more permanent trade route for a consortium of South Korean corporations to utilize.³⁶

Russian energy officials and firms are also evaluating various plans to transmit electricity from the Russian Far East to North or South Korea.³⁷ The governments are still pondering a megaproject in which Russia would spend USD 25 billion over 20 years to modernize North Korea's dilapidated 3,000km rail network in return for privileged access to exploit North Korea's mineral resources, whose value might exceed that cost by several orders of magnitude.³⁸ Pyongyang has also floated a proposal that would give Russia exploration rights and access to the Onsong copper mine in the North Hamgyong Province in exchange for Russia's paying the electricity costs in Rason, Chongjin, Tanchon, and Wonsan-Mount Kumgang on the North's eastern shores.³⁹

32. "Russia Reconstructs 4 Railway Stations in N. Korea," *APN News*, January 28, 2011.

33. Anna Fifield and Michael Birnbaum, "North Korea Might be Courting Russia, but China Still Looms Larger," *The Washington Post*, May 5, 2015.

34. Vladimir Soldatkin and Peter Graff, "Russia Writes off 90 Percent of North Korea Debt, Eyes Gas Pipeline," Reuters, April 19, 2014; "Russia, North Korea Conduct First Transactions in Rubles: Ministry," RIA Novosti, October 20, 2014.

35. Alexander Vorontsov, "Is Russia-North Korea Cooperation at a New Stage?" (38 North, May 8, 2014), <http://38north.org/2014/05/avorontsov050814>.

36. "S. Korea to Launch Pilot Shipment Via N. Korea-Russia Route this Week," Yonhap News Agency, November 24, 2014.

37. Leo Byrne, "Wired Up: North Korea Looks to Russia for Electricity," *NK News*, February 2, 2015.

38. "Russia Eyes Railway-for-resources Project with North Korea," AFP, October 30, 2014.

39. "North Korea Offers Russia Copper Ore in Exchange for Electricity," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, May 6, 2015.

To circumvent the Western sanctions imposed on both their economies, which make it difficult for them to use Western currencies and financial institutions, the Russian and DPRK governments have agreed that they use rubles for some transactions, which could make it easier to realize their declared objective of raising two-way trade to USD 1 billion by 2020.⁴⁰ The first ruble-based transaction appeared in some agreements reached during the October 2014 meeting of the Russia-DPRK intergovernmental committee on commercial-economic relations.⁴¹ That same month, the Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East said that it was looking for ways to expand use of the ruble between the two countries as a means to increase the volume of bilateral economic exchanges.⁴² In January 2015, the DPRK Foreign Trade Bank began accepting rubles.⁴³

North Korea has many minerals and other natural resources, but what Russian entrepreneurs (who can acquire these natural resources in Russia or from other foreign sources) most value about North Korea is its pivotal location connecting Russia and East Asia. They want to make the DPRK into a transit country for Russian energy and economic exports to the ROK and other Asia-Pacific countries. Russian planners aspire to construct energy pipelines between Russia and South Korea across North Korean territory.⁴⁴ They have also discussed building a trans-Korean railroad and linking it with Russia's Trans-Siberian rail system. If realized, the new rail line would allow the shipment of goods between Europe and Korea to proceed three times faster than through the Suez Canal.⁴⁵ Russians have also sought to

40. Elena Holodny, "North Korea and Russia Are Undermining America's 'Weaponization of Finance' Plan," *Business Insider*, January 21, 2015.

41. "Russia, North Korea Conduct First Transactions in Rubles: Ministry," RIA Novosti, October 20, 2014.

42. Kang Tae-jun, "North Korea Russia Trade Takes Another Step," *The Diplomat*, January 21, 2015.

43. *Ibid.*

44. "Seoul Proposes Peace, Economic Ties with Russia, N.Korea," RIA Novosti, January 21, 2008; "Putin Reiterates Readiness to Assist Korean Projects-1," RIA Novosti, October 9, 2007.

45. "Russia to Extend Trans-Eurasian Rail Project to Korea," *Russia Today*, June 6, 2006.

use the DPRK's ice-free ports, which unlike Vladivostok, Russia's main Pacific port, are accessible year-round.

But progress towards boosting Russian-DPRK economic ties has remained extremely modest. The Ministry for the Development has managed to build a pontoon bridge at the Khasan border crossing between the two countries, providing a secondary land crossing over the Tumen River.⁴⁶ However, other large-scale transportation projects remain works in progress or simply planning concepts without concrete realization. Bilateral trade between the two countries, worth around USD 100-200 million in recent years, accounts for only a miniscule amount of Russia's total trade and a distinct minority of North Korea's international economic activity. According to the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency, China remains North Korea's leading trading partner, with two-way trade amounting to USD 6.86 billion in 2014, equating to a staggering 90.1 percent of all DPRK trade for that year. In 2013, the Minister for Development of the Russian Far East Alexander Galushka and DPRK Minister of Foreign Trade Ri Ryong-nam signed an agreement to increase bilateral trade between Russia and North Korea to USD 1 billion by 2020 through expanded "trade, investment, transport, energy and natural resources, employment and interregional cooperation."⁴⁷ Even so, Russia-DPRK trade remains at low levels, with the first three quarters of 2014 seeing a *decline* compared with the first nine months in 2013.⁴⁸ While North Korea increased its exports to Moscow, led by a spurt in the textile sector, the value of Russian oil imports fell even more.⁴⁹ Second-place Russia is not far ahead of India, Thailand, and even Bangladesh.⁵⁰ The volume of

46. "North Korea and the Russian Far East to be Connected by a Pontoon Bridge," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, May 6, 2015.

47. Kang Tae-jun, "Russia Signs Economic Development Protocol with North Korea," *NK News*, April 3, 2014.

48. Marcus Noland and Kevin Stahler, "Russia-DPRK Relations Update: Are Fighter Jet Sales in the Cards?" (Peterson Institute of International Economics, January 26, 2015), <http://blogs.piie.com/nk/?p=13794>.

49. Oh Seok-min, "N. Korea's Exports to Russia Jump 32 pct in 2014: Report," Yonhap News Agency, March 18, 2015.

50. Institute for Far Eastern Studies, "North Korea's Trade Volume in 2014: \$7.6

DPRK trade and investment with China will likely remain many times greater than with Russia for years given the greater complementarities of the Chinese and North Korean economies and the deep-rooted and long standing joint PRC-DPRK economic activities and interdependencies. North Korea's continuing frictions with the international community have severely impeded progress in the transnational projects involving North Korean territory. South Korean distrust of the North and other factors also make these projects realization difficult. Rajin has become a transit point for the export of Russian coal to the ROK through the DPRK's territory, but not for shipping any other Russian goods to South Korea or other Asian markets, not even to North Korean clients.⁵¹

Russia still refuses to provide direct economic assistance to North Korea besides some shipments of humanitarian food aid and typically demands that all transactions conform to free market principles, without state subsidies. Russia has treated its commercial relations with the DPRK exclusively from a market cost-benefit analysis perspective, which considerably constrained economic ties. The one exception has been the thousands of North Korean guest workers who work on logging, construction, and other projects in remote camps in north-eastern Russia, a practice that began during the Soviet period and has continued since then. Although the workers escape the famine conditions that sometimes prevail in the North, their living conditions are hard and the Russian government turns over much of their earnings to the DPRK.⁵² A bilateral agreement obliges the Russian authorities to render any North Koreans who flee the camps or who illegally enter the Russian Federation from North Korea over to the DPRK authorities, where they face severe if not fatal punishment.⁵³

billion USD," (North Korean Economy Watch, June 17, 2015), <http://www.nkeconwatch.com/2015/06/17/north-koreas-trade-volume-in-2014-7-6-billion-usd/>.

51. Anna Fifield and Michael Birnbaum, "North Korea Might be Courting Russia, but China Still Looms Larger," *The Washington Post*, May 5, 2015.

52. Alexey Eremenkou, "Russia Moves to Send North Korean Refugees Back Home to Uncertain Fate," *Moscow Times*, November 14, 2014.

Other barriers to DPRK-Russian economic exchanges have included the limited commercial experience and marketable skills of the North Korean workforce, widespread impoverishment that makes purchasing Russian consumer goods impossible for most North Koreans, the use of barter trade, corruption, contractual unreliability, supply interruptions and other shortages, and the DPRK's underdeveloped transportation, energy, and other infrastructure. Given these impediments, trying to reconstruct the DPRK rail network and build new trans-Korean railroads and pipelines could take decades and cost billions of dollars.⁵⁴ The success of these projects would also require an unprecedented period of cooperative relations among the two Koreas and Russia. In the past, the poor relations between the two Korean governments have meant that these projects are excessively risky or unprofitable for even state-backed investors.⁵⁵ The DPRK authorities have suspended or appropriated joint international projects during a crisis or for economic or political leverage, with the shutdown of the Kaesong Industrial Complex a couple of years ago as a telling example. An emerging challenge is that, if U.S. and other sources of shale gas become widely available on world markets, they could drive down global prices, reducing Asian demand for Russian natural gas imports and therefore Russian profits.⁵⁶

The prospects for near-term Russian-DPRK military-industrial cooperation are also low. In November 2014, the vice chief of the

53. "Russia and North Korea Sign Agreement to Deport Illegal Immigrants," *The Guardian*, November 11, 2014; Alexey Eremenkou, "Russia Moves to Send North Korean Refugees Back Home to Uncertain Fate," *Moscow Times*, November 14, 2014; and Alexander Podrabinek, "Russia Will Deport Refugees Back to North Korea," (Institute of Modern Russia, November 5, 2014), <http://www.imrussia.org/en/opinions/2077-russia-will-deport-refugees-back-to-north-korea>.

54. Doug Bandow, "Russia and North Korea Play Nice: Vladimir Putin's Ukrainian Dance with Kim Jong-Un," *The World Post*, March 24, 2015.

55. Anna Fifield and Michael Birnbaum, "North Korea Might be Courting Russia, but China Still Looms Larger," *The Washington Post*, May 5, 2015.

56. Troy Stangarone, "Securing Korea's Energy Future," (The Peninsula, Korea Economic Institute of America, October 21, 2013), <http://blog.keia.org/2013/10/securing-koreas-energy-future/>.

DPRK's army general staff, No Kwang-chol, traveled with a North Korean leadership team that visited Moscow. According to the Korean Central News Agency, he met with his Russian counterpart and, "Both sides had a wide-ranging exchange of views on putting the friendship and cooperation between the armies of the two countries on a new higher stage."⁵⁷ The DPRK is especially eager to acquire new Russian warplanes to replace its aging Soviet-era planes. The North Koreans reportedly have requested Russia's top-line Su-35, which the DPRK cannot afford and would find challenging to operate and maintain.⁵⁸ Moscow has yet to show any interest in such a transaction, or even helping the DPRK sustain and modernize its existing fleet of Soviet-designed warplanes. Although international sanctions limit foreign military sales to the DPRK, Russia might be able to provide spare parts under the guise of aiding North Korea's civilian airliners. North Korea has continued to purchase Russian jet airliners to complement its Soviet legacy air transport fleet for reasons of cost, preexisting infrastructure and Western sanctions. The national airline carrier Air Koryo obtained a Tu-204 airliner in 2008 and 2010.⁵⁹

Reflections and Implications

Moscow's policies towards Korean issues have remained remarkably consistent during the past two decades. Russian policymakers are eager to normalize the security situation on the Korean Peninsula both for its own sake and to realize their economic ambitions there. In the security realm, Russia's objectives include averting another major war on the Korean Peninsula; preventing DPRK actions from prompting additional countries to obtain nuclear weapons or ballistic missiles; keeping Moscow a major security actor in the region; and

57. "Putin Ready for Summit with Kim," *Korea Herald*, November 21, 2014.

58. Zachary Keck, "North Korea Wants To Buy Russia's Super Advanced Su-35 Fighter Jet," *The National Interest*, January 9, 2015.

59. Associated Press, "EU will Revise Controversial Airline Blacklist," *USA Today*, March 25, 2010.

eventually eliminating the DPRK's nuclear program by peaceful means. Furthermore, Russian policymakers and entrepreneurs have retained visions of building economic projects through the Korean Peninsula that would deepen their country's connections with East Asia, which would benefit the Russian Far East in particular but also serve Moscow's larger goal of integrating Russia more deeply into the prosperous Asia Pacific region.⁶⁰ Common Russian strategies to achieve these security goals have included inducing North Korea to suspend its disruptive nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs through economic and security assurances; ending provocative actions by either the North or by the ROK-U.S. alliance; promoting dialogue among all the influential players regarding Korea with Russian participation, minimizing the use of coercion and punishment against Pyongyang by keeping any unavoidable sanctions limited; encouraging all parties to fulfill their previous commitments to prevent the unraveling of earlier agreements; and maintaining a prominent role for Russian diplomacy regarding the Koreas through joint declarations, senior official trips to the region, and keeping the six-party talks and the United Nations Security Council as the main institutions for Korean diplomacy rather than any alternative framework.

The aggregate impact of Russia's new activism in the DPRK is unknowable. If the DPRK's nuclear and missile programs continue unchecked, Pyongyang could amass a larger and more deadly nuclear arsenal in the next few years. This could pose a much more significant threat to the region, embolden Pyongyang to take greater risks, increase the danger that North Korea sells fissile material to another country or to terrorists in exchange for much-needed hard currency, and prompt a vigorous, defensive, and possibly military response by the United States and its allies. What is unclear is how Russia's intervention will affect these dynamics.

Russian policymakers see a virtuous circle at work in their security and economic policies towards North Korea. Russian policymakers

60. "Russia Reconstructs 4 Railway Stations in N. Korea," *APN News*, January 28, 2011.

argue that Moscow needs a benign regional security environment to achieve its Asian economic goals, including within eastern Russia. According to Gleb Ivashentsov, Russian ambassador to South Korea, regional stability is “crucial to Russia’s economic development,” especially plans to increase exploitation of the natural resources located in Siberia and the Far East. Comparing Russian energy ambitions in eastern Russia to “the development of the American West,” he explained that “Russia needs security guarantees in neighboring countries” for its realization.⁶¹ Conversely, Russian policymakers say that their commercial projects involving the Koreans, if realized, would contribute to regional peace and security, arguing that, “There is no better way than long term economic projects to rebuild trust between North and South Korea.”⁶² The logic is that these commercial projects could provide the North with an alternative source of income to trafficking in illegal WMD exports or leveraging threats to expand the DPRK nuclear weapons program to extract humanitarian and financial aid from the international community.⁶³ Putin joins other Russian officials in arguing that deepening Russian-DPRK “political ties and trade and economic cooperation is definitely in the interests of the peoples of both countries and ensuring regional stability and security.”⁶⁴

It is true that Russia cannot realize its ambitions to build rail links, energy pipelines, and other investments that would link Russia and the ROK through DPRK territory unless intra-Korean tensions subside and the sanctions on North Korea for its nuclear weapons and other illegal activities are relaxed. It is also possible that Russia’s commercial and diplomatic engagement could temper Pyongyang’s problematic external and internal behavior by reassuring its leader-

61. “Russia Does Not See N. Korea As Nuclear Power: Envoy,” Yonhap News Agency, January 22, 2009.

62. Kim Se-jeong, “North Korea’s Military Action Is Intolerable, Russian Amb. Says,” *Korea Times*, January 21, 2009.

63. Andrei Lankov, “North Korea Will Never Give up Its Nuclear Weapons — Lankov,” *NK News*, July 29, 2013.

64. Doug Bandow, “Russia and North Korea Play Nice: Vladimir Putin’s Ukrainian Dance with Kim Jong-un,” *The World Post*, March 24, 2015.

ship while also discouraging the DPRK from testing more nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles for fear of alienating Moscow. However, Russian history and writings suggest Moscow will be tempted by its poor relations with Washington to play the “Pyongyang Pivot” and back North Korean belligerence as a means to gain leverage with or simply punish the United States.⁶⁵ Or the greater Russian support could boost North Korea’s military-industrial potential, weaken the DPRK’s diplomatic isolation, embolden more Pyongyang’s provocations, reduce Beijing’s willingness to pressure Pyongyang due to North Korea’s having alternative Russian options, and delay unification by helping prolong the existence of an odious regime that tortures its own people and threatens the rest of the world.

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