

## **Russo-Japanese Relations from a Regional Perspective\***

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The present crisis over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs obliges us not only to ponder Korean issues extremely carefully, but also to subject the complex interstate relations of the six parties involved to closer scrutiny. One example of those relations is Russo-Japanese relations. Accordingly, this article examines the role that the Korean issue, particularly North Korea's aggressive nuclear and missile programs and the consequences thereof, play in Russo-Japanese relations and the efforts to normalize them. We find that not only do North Korea's actions exacerbate the contradictions between Moscow and Tokyo, but Russia is also unprepared to make any concessions to Japan on any of the major security issues in the bilateral relationship's agenda, including the North Korean issue. This fact calls into question the soundness of Tokyo's assessment of prospects for this normalization and the likelihood of Tokyo achieving its hope for goals from this process.

**Keywords:** Russia, China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea

### **Introduction: The Regional Dimensions of Russo-Japanese Relations**

The present crisis over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs requires us to not only ponder Korean issues extremely carefully, but also to subject the complex relationships among the six countries involved to closer scrutiny. One example of those relations is Russo-Japanese rela-

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tions. Indeed, both sides have been discussing or negotiating a rapprochement and normalization for five years with little or nothing to show for them except, possibly, for some transitory and evanescent prestige gains for Russia from the summit in December 2016.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, those discussions occurred in the context of over sixty years of inconclusive negotiations between Russia and Japan to bring about a peace treaty ending World War II and normalizing bilateral relations. At the same time, no one should think that there is little or no connection between these bilateral relations and the larger regional security issues in North-east Asia such as the current Korean crisis or the impact of China's increasingly assertive behavior.

Indeed, both the trajectory of those bilateral relations as well as the current Korean crisis demonstrate that the reverberations from the recent failure at the December 2016 summit to achieve Russo-Japanese normalization, despite Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's best efforts, will not be confined to the bilateral relations of Russia and Japan or to those two states alone. Neither is that failure an accidental or temporary situation. For five years Tokyo has chased after Moscow to rebuild a strategic dialogue, or even normalization of the bilateral relationship, with nothing to show for it. As we noted above, Moscow's gains are ephemeral at best. Furthermore, the current Korean crisis arguably could decisively impress upon the Abe government in Tokyo because of the fact that it has embarked upon a fruitless quest.

In this respect the Korean crisis as well as the complex Sino-American "minuet" already demonstrates that the bilateral normalization of Russo-Japanese ties cannot be discussed, let alone pursued, outside of a deep assessment of the broader regional framework. Nevertheless the vast majority of analyses of the current dialogue between Moscow and Tokyo focus almost exclusively on their bilateral relations and omit consideration of broader Asian security issues such as China and Korea's places in this relationship. As Michito Tsururoka observed, Russo-Japanese relations in general, and efforts to normalize them in particular,

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1. Sergey Radchenko, "How the Kuril Islands Are Testing Shinzo Abe's Statesmanship," [www.thediplomat.com](http://www.thediplomat.com), December 22 2016.

cannot ever be dealt with as a purely bilateral issue.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately these omissions skew our ability to analyze the issues and underestimate Japanese if not Russian reasons for this effort at normalization or the consequences of the outcome to date of those efforts. They also lead both analysts and governments astray in their attempts to analyze this relationship and its regional context. Consequently it is arguable that both sides are failing because they are, to a considerable degree, prisoners of their own misperceptions, if not delusions.

Japanese analysts do not hide the fact that security considerations have driven the Abe government's quest for normalization with Russia. As Michito Tsururoka has written in a recent assessment of the Russia-China-Japan triangular relationship,

Regardless of the perceptions — negative or positive — that people from the two nations have of each other, Tokyo needs to deal with Moscow in the context of Japan's strategic environment, which obviously includes the rise of China and the role of the United States in Northeast Asia. For Moscow as well, how to deal with Tokyo cannot be separated from its overall regional and global strategy.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, it is no secret that Japanese policymakers still believe and hope that a deal with Russia will facilitate Russian movement away from China towards Japan even if it is merely a modest gravitation.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, they still assert that the rationale advanced in 2013's National Security Strategy remains the driver of this quest. As Tsururoka writes,

The Abe government's fundamental reason for seeking to improve

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2. Michito Tsururoka, "Strategic Considerations in Japan-Russia Relations: The Rise of China and the U.S.-Japan Alliance," Shoichi Itoh, et al, *Japan and the Sino-Russian Entente: The Future of Major-Power Relations in Northeast Asia*, Seattle: National Bureau of Research Asia, NBR Special Report No. 64, 2017, p. 19, [www.nbr.org](http://www.nbr.org).
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
  4. Celine Pajon, "Japan-Russia: Toward a Strategic Partnership?" *Russie.Nei.Visions* No. 72, Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), September, 2013, [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org); Gilbert Rozman, "Introduction," in Gilbert Rozman Ed., *Japan-Russia Relations: Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance*, Washington, D.C.: Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2016, pp. 5-7.

relations with Russia has been consistent and importantly stated before the Ukraine crisis and Russia's isolation from the West. The National Security Strategy (NSS) adopted in December 2013, argued that "*under the increasingly severe security environment in East Asia, it is critical for Japan to advance cooperation with Russia in all areas, including security and energy, thereby enhancing bilateral relations as a whole, in order to ensure its security.*"<sup>5</sup>

Neither is this just a recent perception of Japanese aspirations that an agreement with Russia might move it away in some degree from China and closer to Japan. Even in 2013, Japanese analysts claimed to see increased signs of Russo-Chinese discord.<sup>6</sup> Since then, Japanese analysts have consistently held to a line that perceives mounting discord and suspicion between Beijing and Moscow, a perception that considerably differs from what the best Western analyses are seeing, especially as Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to much greater Russian dependence on China.<sup>7</sup> For example, Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently stated that bilateral relations between them have reached "a historic maximum" and are stronger than they have ever been and are based on mutual interests, not external factors like a shared antipathy toward the U.S.<sup>8</sup> And his counterpart, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov essentially agreed when he stated, "I fully share your view that Russia and China bear special responsibility for the maintenance of the stability in international relations and preventing unilateral attempts to use force to settle

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5. Tsururoka, p. 14.

6. Celine Pajon, "Japan-Russia: Toward a Strategic Partnership?" *Russie.Nei.Visions* No. 72, Institut Francais des Relations Internationales (IFRI), September, 2013, [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

7. Leon Daiske Oberbauer and Alexandra Sakaki, "Japan's Debate Over Russia and the Ukraine Conflict," *Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik*, [www.swp.de](http://www.swp.de), October, 2015, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/zeitschriften-schau/2015ZS03e\\_skk\\_Oberbaeumer.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/zeitschriften-schau/2015ZS03e_skk_Oberbaeumer.pdf); Marcin Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations In the Post-Crisis International Order*, London: Routledge, 2015.

8. China's Foreign Minister Wants You to Know: Russia is Beijing's Best Friend Forever," *The Moscow Times*, March 8, 2017, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/chinas-foreign-minister-wants-you-to-know-russia-is-our-best-friend-forever-57366>.

conflicts and crises.”<sup>9</sup> Among other things Lavrov was saying that it is up to Washington to refrain from “unilateral” activities that threaten North Korea, hardly a response to Tokyo’s anxieties. Indeed Russia recently vetoed a UN resolution on North Korea while Lavrov derided the U.S.’s previous policy of “strategic patience” for not being patient and imposing harsh sanctions on North Korea even though Moscow had voted for many of those sanctions.<sup>10</sup> And for all China’s displeasure at Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile policies this has also been its stance even as it puts pressure on North Korea. Indeed, regarding Korea, Moscow has long followed Beijing’s lead even as it tries to enhance its own standing there and this continues to be the case.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Russian analysts have actually criticized this Russian propensity to follow China’s lead on Korea.<sup>12</sup>

It might have been the case that in 2016 Russia, beginning in 2016, became concerned that China is sacrificing Russian interests in Korea to the cause of Chinese ties with the U.S. Therefore Moscow may have tried to send a hint to China of its displeasure by vetoing the resolution on North Korea that China supported.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless Moscow and Beijing

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9. “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s opening remarks at talks with Foreign Minister of China Wang Yi, Astana, April 21, 2017, [http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya\\_s\\_uchastiem\\_ministra/-/asset\\_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/2734437](http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/2734437).
  10. Tom O’Connor, “North Korea Missile Launch Sparks U.S. and Russia Argument at United Nations,” <http://www.newsweek.com/un-condemn-north-korea-missile-us-russia-fight-586503>, April 20, 2017; Euan McKirdy and Richard Roth, “Russia Vetoes UN Statement On North Korea’s Missile Tests,” [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com), April 19, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/19/asia/russia-un-veto-north-korea/index.html>.
  11. Samuel Ramani, “What’s Behind Sino-Russian Cooperation on North Korea?” <http://thediplomat.com/2017/04/whats-behind-sino-russian-cooperation-on-north-korea/>, April 27, 2017.
  12. Alexander Vorontsov and Georgy Toloraya, *Military Alert on the Korean Peninsula: Time For Some Conclusions*, Carnegie Moscow Center, June 2014, [www.ceip.org](http://www.ceip.org).
  13. Georgy Toloraya, “UNSCR 2270: A Conundrum for Russia,” <http://38north.org/2016/03/gtoloraya030516/print/>, March 5, 2016; “Trump praises Chinese efforts on N Korea -The Asian Age, April 21, 2017; Christopher Bodeen, “In Beijing, Tillerson Urges China-US Cooperation on N. Korea,” <http://www.nbc->

soon enough resumed their collaboration on North Korea.<sup>14</sup> Thus even in the unlikely event that some daylight opens up between Moscow and Beijing on North Korea, it is not likely to benefit Japan's pursuit of normalization with Moscow because it is Russia that will take the more pro-North Korean line, confounding any prospect for it helping Tokyo with its real security anxieties vis-à-vis North Korea. Indeed, former Bush administration official, Michael Green, the Vice-President for Asia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington (CSIS) recently made the point that in the six-party process and in putting pressure on Pyongyang, Moscow has been utterly unhelpful.<sup>15</sup>

Neither would divisions between Moscow and Beijing over North Korea do anything to assuage Japan's concerns about the most urgent threat it sees, namely mounting Russo-Chinese military collaboration. Indeed, since 2014 that cooperation against Japan has increased.<sup>16</sup> As Michael Yahuda observes, the attitude of Russian elites is very much in favor of enhanced collaboration.

Moscow believes that bolstering China's military position in East Asia is very much in Russian interests. As the official in charge of Russian arms exports stated in April 2015, "if we work in China's interests, that means we also work in our interests." In other words, the U.S.-led economic sanctions on Russia have made Sino-Russian strategic interests more congruent.<sup>17</sup>

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miami.com/news/national-international/North-Korea-South-China-Sea-on-Tillerson-Agenda-in-Beijing-416493283.html, March 28, 2017.

14. Samuel Ramani, "What's Behind Sino-Russian Cooperation on North Korea?" <http://thediplomat.com/2017/04/whats-behind-sino-russian-cooperation-on-north-korea/>, April 27, 2017.
15. Center for Strategic And International Studies, "Russian Roulette: Of Russo-Japanese Relations," Podcast, no. 31, June 2, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/podcasts/russian-roulette>.
16. Ken Jimbo, "Sino-Russian Military Cooperation and Japanese Defense Policy," Shoichi Itoh, et al, *Japan and the Sino-Russian Entente: The Future of Major-Power Relations in Northeast Asia*, Seattle: National Bureau of Research Asia, NBR Special Report No. 64, 2017, pp. 25-26, [www.nbr.org](http://www.nbr.org).
17. Michael Yahuda, "Japan and the Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership," *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Lavrov's statement above and the following remarks by Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu indicate that Yahuda's observations retain their force. Thus, Shoigu openly appealed for an alliance with China in November 2014 and he recently remarked,

"Russia's strategic partner is the People's Republic of China. Bilateral military cooperation is developing actively. Primarily it is focused on the fight against international terrorism. Joint actions are regularly practiced during the military exercises - Naval interaction and Peaceful mission. The Russian Federation continues to prepare specialists for the People's Liberation Army of China. In total more than 3,600 Chinese servicemen have been trained in the universities of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.<sup>18</sup>

Neither is Russia prepared to discuss a Russian gas pipeline to Japan allegedly because Gazprom cannot determine with any clarity what the future Japanese energy demand will be. More likely, it is unwilling to lower the price of gas to meet real market prices despite the downward global pressure on energy prices.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, Russia's tempo of bomber flights into and over Japanese air space has reached a record level during 2016-17.<sup>20</sup> These flights force Japan to scramble its jets and Russia

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18. "Russian Defense Minister Shoigu: 'The Attempts Of The U.S.-Led West To Impede The Establishment Of A New, Fair World Order Are Leading To Growing Chaos... Russia's Strategic Partner Is China,'" <https://www.memri.org/reports/russian-defense-minister-shoigu-attempts-us-led-west-impede-establishment-new-fair-world>, March 3, 2017; Moscow, *Interfax*, in Russian, November 18, 2014, *Open Source Center, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Central Eurasia*, (Henceforth), *FBIS SOV*, November 18, 2014; Moscow, *Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation*, in Russian, November 18, 2014, Moscow, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta Online*, in Russian, November 20, 2014, *FBIS SOV*, November 20, 2014; *FBIS SOV*, November 27, 2014.

19. Elena Mazneva and Stephen Stapczynski, "Russia Turns Wary On Japan Gas Future As Abe Heads To Moscow," <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-04-09/russia-turning-iffy-on-japan-gas-future-as-abe-heads-to-moscow>, April 9, 2017.

20. Isabel Leonard, "Japan's Jet Scrambles Against Foreign Planes Reach Record," <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-04-14/japan-s-jet-scrambles-against-foreign-planes-reach-record-chart>, April 13, 2017.

does so even as regional tensions rise in the wake of North Korea's nuclear and missile tests.

Finally, with regard to the long-standing issue of the Kurile Islands, Japanese frustration should be readily apparent to any observer. Japan, in its unceasing pursuit of reconciliation with Russia, has even prepared a plan for joint economic development of the islands largely using Japanese money, i.e. essentially a subsidy to Russia. Nevertheless, Russian opinion remains obdurate that the Kurile Islands issue is a problem "that was unambiguously solved in 1945. That is our territory. Period."<sup>21</sup> Thus, Russia refuses to meet Japan halfway, or even part way, with regard to China, Korea, energy, and the Kurile Islands. However, it demands that Japan unequivocally renounce its claim to the Islands, accept that Russia supports Beijing and Pyongyang against Japan, ignore mounting Russo-Chinese military cooperation against Japan in areas like the East China Sea, overlook Russia's refusal to sell its gas while giving Russia a large amount of trade or investment capital that, given the nature of the Russian economy, will be inefficiently utilized if not stolen.<sup>22</sup>

While it is no surprise that some Japanese analysts believed they could induce a broader transformation of Russo-Chinese relations through a rapprochement with Russia despite the visible increase in Sino-Russian intimacy, and that they had to do so to enhance Japanese security given unfavorable regional security trends, this belief has proven to be a serious delusion, especially in the wake of the recent failed summit.<sup>23</sup> As Gilbert Rozman wrote,

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21. "Russian Bid To Involve Japan In Developing Kuril Isles Questioned," [www.politcom.ru](http://www.politcom.ru), March 1, 2017 From *BBC Monitoring*.

22. Center for Strategic And International Studies, "Russian Roulette: Of Russo-Japanese Relations," Podcast, no. 31, June 2, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/podcasts/russian-roulette>.

23. Celine Pajon, "Japan-Russia: Toward a Strategic Partnership?" *Russie.Nei.Visions* No. 72, Institut Francais des Relations Internationales (IFRI), September, 2013, [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org); Leon Daiske Oberbauer and Alexandra Sakaki, "Japan's Debate Over Russia and the Ukraine Conflict," *Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik*, [www.swp.de](http://www.swp.de), October, 2015, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/zeitschriftenschau/2015ZS03e\\_skk\\_Oberbaeumer.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/zeitschriftenschau/2015ZS03e_skk_Oberbaeumer.pdf).



Indeed, only an exaggerated notion of Japan's geopolitical weight (not evident in Russia) can account for the expectations expressed in Japan about the impact of a deal; it would turn Russia away from siding with China; it would lead Russia to accept Japan's more active military posture; and it would be the driving force for Russia to stop pressuring Japan and to cooperate, instead. As hopes for a favorable territorial deal fade, the geopolitical case is being oversold.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, signifying Russia's intimacy with China, Russia has even accepted the new deployment of Chinese ICBMs in Heilongjiang near their common border with equanimity and sees it as posing no threat.<sup>25</sup>

### **Korea as a Factor in the Bilateral Equation**

Therefore, the impasse in Russo-Japanese relations also affects Russia and Japan's relationship regarding the North Korean nuclear program that threatens Japan and to some degree Russia, even if in the latter's case it is an indirect threat.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, both Russia and Japan could benefit substantially from a reduction in the threat to regional if not international security posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programs even if Japan views the North Korean threat as secondary compared to the threats posed by China. Even if the North Korean threat is not the main preoccupation of either Russian or Japanese planners, that threat is rapidly growing in saliency as North Korea's missile and nuclear capabilities grow. Indeed, Abe has labeled the North Korean threat as "substantially more serious than in the past" and has openly mulled over the idea of giving Japan's defense forces an open-ended order to intercept

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24. Gilbert Rozman, "Introduction, Gilbert Rozman, Ed., *Japan-Russia Relations: Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance*, Washington, D.C., 2016, p. 10.

25. "China Reportedly Deploys ICBMs Near Russia's Border," <https://www.rt.com/news/374874-china-icbm-russia-border/>, January 24, 2017.

26. Stephen Blank, "Russia and the Two Koreas In the Context of Moscow's Asian Policy," *Academic Paper Series*, Korean Economic Institute of America, October 2015, [www.keia.org](http://www.keia.org); also in Gilbert Rozman, Ed., *On Korea, 2016*: Washington, D.C.: Korean Economic Institute of America, 2016, pp. 60-76.

North Korean missiles due to the DPRK's repeated missile tests.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the threat has clearly grown in recent times as the tension reached a point where China warned that a war involving North Korea could break out at any moment.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Abe has warned that North Korean missiles directed against Japan could possibly contain sarin nerve gas.<sup>29</sup> Abe also warned of the possibility of refugees and, displaying Tokyo's anxiety over the U.S.'s possible actions, has sought U.S. notice of any action against North Korea even if U.S. bases on Japanese soil are not involved.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, the Korean threat to Japan, just like Russo-Japanese relations, cannot be disentangled from Tokyo's agenda with Beijing and Moscow. The possibility that South Korea could share intelligence about North Korean missiles through their joint participation in the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) network with the U.S. causes a lot of aggravation in Beijing and Moscow and worsens their relationship with Japan and South Korea.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Moscow's main complaint to Tokyo precisely concerns THAAD and Japan's participation in the alliance with the U.S.

In other words, all these problems are inter-related and what happens with Russo-Japanese relations does not stay confined to the bilateral dimension of those countries' regional and overall foreign policies.

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27. "Japan PM Calls North Korea Threat 'Substantially More Serious' Than In the Past," Reuters, September 21, 2016; Ankit Panda, "Japan Mulls Open-Ended Missile Intercept Order Amid Repeated North Korean Missile Testing," [www.thediplomat.com](http://www.thediplomat.com), August 8, 2016.
  28. "'Conflict Could Break Out At Any Moment' Over North Korea: China," <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2017/04/14/conflict-could-break-out-any-moment-over-north-korea-china>, April 14, 2017.
  29. Mari Yamaguchi, "Japan PM: North Korea May Be Capable Of Sarin-Loaded Missiles," [www.militarytimes.com](http://www.militarytimes.com), April 13, 2017.
  30. Mari Yamaguchi, "Abe: Japan Planning For Refugees In Event Of Korean Crisis," *Associated Press*, April 17, 2017, [www.stripes.com](http://www.stripes.com); "Japan Seeks Notice On Actions Against North Korea, Even If US Bases Not Used," *The Japan News/Yomiuri*, April 13, 2017, [www.stripes.com](http://www.stripes.com).
  31. "Laura Zhou," Seoul's Tilt Towards Tokyo, Could Lead To Worst-Case Scenario For Beijing," *South China Morning Post*, August 5, 2016, [www.scmp.com](http://www.scmp.com).

Rather Russo-Japanese relations are intertwined with their overall Asian relations if not their global postures. Finally, when one introduces the “wild card” of what the Trump administration’s policies regarding North Korea and China might be, it is clear that the North Korean issue urgently demands new thinking. Indeed, if a Russo-Japanese rapprochement were to occur and generate a qualitatively transformational dynamic upon either Sino-Japanese relations or the Korean challenge, that would represent a fundamental change from the current situation where Russo-Japanese relations, due to the two countries’ mutual estrangement, possess little dynamic significance for the structure or composition of Northeast Asian security relations and in the North Korean issue where both sides have little independent room for maneuver.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, Russo-Chinese relations, that are surely connected to the state of Japan’s relations with each of those governments also impact all processes connected with Korea. The fact that Russia has come to identify with China’s policies towards North Korea and its nuclearization already limits the potential for Japan to benefit from any potential rapprochement with Russia. For example, once South Korea announced it was accepting the U.S. THAAD network, the Chinese and Russian Foreign Ministries issued a joint critique and pledged themselves to follow up with further cooperation against this deployment.

Both sides expressed serious concerns over the advancement of deploying the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile-defense system in the Republic of Korea (ROK) by the US and the ROK. Both sides agreed that the US’ non-constructive acts of unilaterally developing and promoting the deployment of strategic missile-defense systems on the Korean Peninsula and other parts of the world will pose negative impacts on the international and regional strategic balance as well as security and stability. Both sides agreed that advancing the THAAD system deployment in the ROK by the US and the ROK is evidently inconsistent with

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32. Georgy Toloraya, “Implications of Russia-Japan Relations For the Region,” Gilbert Rozman, Ed., *Japan-Russia Relations: Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance*, Washington, D.C., 2016, p. 71; Vasily Kashin, “Russian Views on Security and Foreign Policy in the Asia-Pacific and Prospects For Cooperation With Japan,” *Ibid.*, p. 81.

their claimed purpose, which will severely damage the national strategic security interests of countries in this region, including China and Russia. China and Russia firmly oppose relevant plans of the US and the ROK, and will proactively think about measures that can strengthen China-Russia coordination against the negative factors rising from the situation.<sup>33</sup>

Their joint opposition and joint commitment to countermeasures still continue unabated as they both argue that this system threatens regional and strategic stability and continue to cooperate on a joint strategy to undo or overcome the consequences of South Korea's decision to accept THAAD.<sup>34</sup>

Since North Korea's nuclearization threatens Japan and Japan is already part of the THAAD network, this decision by Moscow and Beijing certainly indicates their greater coordination in a sphere that is inimical to Japan's vital interests. This especially highlighted anti-Japanese coordination given Abe's observation that North Korea's threat is growing. Moreover, the joint threat of countermeasures against THAAD heightens the major Japanese fear concerning Russo-Chinese military cooperation.<sup>35</sup> The THAAD episode also reminds Tokyo of China's aggressiveness, for once South Korea announced its intention to join it, China began a protracted campaign of intense economic-political pressure and the familiar tactics of Chinese economic warfare against South Korea.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the THAAD issue epitomizes the gaps between Japanese vital interests and Russia (and China) with regard to the North Korean issue and to Asian security more broadly.

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33. Ministry of *Foreign Affairs* of the People's Republic of China, "China and Russia Hold the 4th Consultation on Northeast Asia Security," July 29, 2016, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjbxw/t1386345.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1386345.shtml).

34. "China, Russia Promise "Countermeasures to U.S.-Korean Defense System," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, January 13, 2017, [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org).

35. "China, Russia Agree On More 'Countermeasures' Against U.S. Anti-missile System: Xinhua," *Reuters*, January 12, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-nuclear-china-russia-idUSKBN14X00J>.

36. Benjamin Lee, "South Korea's THAAD Dilemma Continues," [www.thediplomat.com](http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/south-koreas-thaad-dilemma-continues/?allpages=yes&print=yes), December 16, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/south-koreas-thaad-dilemma-continues/?allpages=yes&print=yes>; "South Korea Minister Says China Indirectly Retaliating Against THAAD," *Reuters*, January 6, 2017.

On the one hand, placement of the THAAD systems is not a subject for negotiations with Russia as long as the DPRK threatens the U.S.'s main Asian allies and the United States itself. Russia does not have any answers for the North Korean crisis besides blaming Washington for the DPRK missile program and denouncing THAAD, a program that makes eminent sense for South Korea given Pyongyang's policies.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, President Putin recently told at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum that North Korean nuclearization is the result of Washington's abuse of power.

Let us agree on a uniform interpretation of the norms and fundamental principles of international law and adhere to these rules. Because until that happens and as long as the principle that might be right is asserted, we will continue to have problems like the ones we are currently seeing in North Korea. Smaller countries can see no other way to protect their independence, security and sovereignty but by acquiring nuclear weapons. This is what abuse of power leads to.<sup>38</sup>

But from Russia's viewpoint, THAAD is supposedly redundant, not justified, will promote regional insecurity, and further North Korean aggressiveness if not new tests, and is part of a broader and excessively aggressive American policy of sending excessive arms supplies to Northeast Asia to counter North Korean and Chinese threats.<sup>39</sup> Equally, if not more importantly, Russia (and China) believe that the THAAD system will not only destabilize the Korean peninsula but also overall strategic stability in the region. In other words, both governments fear that it will be used to counter their regional nuclear capabilities which, in the final analysis,

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37. Stephen Blank, "Another Russian Failure: Russia and the Korean Question," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 28, 2017, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

38. "St Petersburg International Economic Forum Plenary Meeting," <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54667>, June 2, 2017.

39. "Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's Remarks and Answers To Media Questions At a News Conference Following Russia-Japan Two-Plus-Two Format Consultations, Tokyo, March 20, 2017, *BBC Monitoring From*, [http://www.mid.ru/en/main\\_en](http://www.mid.ru/en/main_en), March 20, 2017; Anna Kireeva, "Positive Scenario I," [www.theasanforum.org](http://www.theasanforum.org), April 17, 2017.

threaten Japan, South Korea, and the U.S.<sup>40</sup> Thus, North Korea's aggressive testing program and the response by Seoul and Tokyo to embrace the THAAD project clearly weakened any possibility for Japanese policy-makers to bring about or benefit from a supposed distancing of Russia from China and reflected a wholly opposite trend towards greater coordination of those states' policies.

THAAD also helped ratchet up bilateral polarization in Northeast Asia between the U.S. alliance system and a Russo-Chinese counter-bloc. Moscow tends to view its relationship with Tokyo in the light of its efforts to induce Japan to move out of the U.S.'s shadow. Moscow's refusal to compromise here evidently stems from the view that Japan has hitherto been unable to conduct an "independent" foreign policy and is too subservient to or dependent upon the U.S. to do so. Therefore, Russia can or at least should "impose terms" upon it. Yet, after Abe defied Washington's admonitions to break allied unity on sanctions and move forward with Moscow it seems that Putin and his entourage want not only a deal but a victory and even a wedge between Tokyo and Washington. Thus, Lavrov stated in Tokyo that, "Russia would like a large and powerful country like Japan to weigh in more on and occupy a more prominent position in international affairs."<sup>41</sup> Japan's refusal to exclude the possibility that if it recovered the Kurile Islands it would not permit a U.S. base there clearly brought home to Russian leaders, and no doubt the military as well, that it would not be so easy to separate Tokyo from Washington and that giving back the Kuriles might reawaken long-standing military fears about a U.S. military threat to Russia.<sup>42</sup>

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40. Dmitry Streltsov, "New Friends: Russia and Japan Are Finding Common Ground," *Moscow Times*, March 20, 2017, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/new-friends-russia-and-japan-are-finding-common-ground-57472>.

41. Ruslan Kostyuk, "Making Sense of Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's Visit To Japan," *www.russia-direct*, April 19, 2016.

42. Alexander Bratersky, Igor Kryuchkov, "US Bases Have Come Into View At the Kuril Negotiations," *www.gazeta.ru*, December 14, 2016, *Retrieved From BBC Monitoring*, December 16, 2016.

## **The North Korean Connection and Its Regional Context**

This specific example also highlights how closely Japanese concerns about North Korea are bound up with its relations with Russia and China as well. Even if China remains its primary concern, Japan certainly has good reason for alarm about North Korea as its nuclear and missile programs proceed apace. Already in 2012, Richard Weitz of the Hudson Institute reported,

Many Japanese experts believe that establishing a robust ballistic missile defense (BMD) is the best course of action to protect their country from DPRK attacks while stating within their constitutional obligations and therefore alleviating South Korean fears. Japan has been developing BMD technologies with the United States in recent years, a process that has annoyed China but strengthened the Japan-U.S. military alliance. But the failure of the Six-Party Talks, which have focused on curtailing North Korea's nuclear weapon activities, to address DPRK missile developments has contributed to Tokyo's dissatisfaction with the process.<sup>43</sup>

Since then, North Korea's nuclear and missile programs have proceeded to the point where it is clear that the DPRK has potentially usable nuclear weapons, is extending their number and range, and producing ever longer-range missiles capable of hitting not only South Korea and Japan but also the U.S. As a result, the Korean situation remains as tense if not tenser than it has been in the past. This seemingly unresolvable situation cannot but add to Japanese planners' security concerns about North Korea. If ever the Korean situation demanded new approaches to regional relationships, including Russo-Japanese ties, this is the time for such creative thinking. And clearly no such new thinking took place regarding Korean developments or how it might affect bilateral relations between Moscow and Tokyo. Neither is there any sign of a rethinking process concerning Korean issues in Russia other than the intensification of coordination with China as cited above.

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43. Richard Weitz, "Regional Powers Grapple With North Korea's New Leader Kim Jong Un," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, XXIV, No. 3, September, 2012, p. 411.

Those considerations raise the question not only of whether a bilateral rapprochement with Russia was or is feasible, but also what either or both sides might gain in regard to regional security by drawing closer together. Indeed, apart from the feasibility of a rapprochement which, to be sure, is at best moot — as the recent failure shows — there are signs that Russia is gravitating ever more to China and that implies not only a failure to break the Sino-Russian entente, but also makes it impossible for Moscow to offer anything constructive towards resolving the Korean crisis generated by North Korea's ongoing nuclearization. Thus, Vasily Kashin, Senior Research Fellow at the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of the Far East, recently wrote that as of 2016 both sides may avoid the term alliance, but the relationship is already something far greater than “neighborliness” or even “strategic partnership.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Dmitri Trenin of the Carnegie Endowment in Moscow subsequently stated,

Beijing can be assured of one thing, though. Any easing in Russia's tensions with the US and the EU will not lead to Moscow abandoning or slackening its ties with China, which today are closer and more solid than the phrase “strategic partnership” suggests.<sup>45</sup>

These observations take their point of departure from the current reality. As Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated,

As regards international issues, we feel — and our Chinese friends share this view — that our cooperation and coordination in the international arena are one of the most important stabilizing factors in the world system. We regularly coordinate our approaches to various conflicts, whether it is in the Middle East, North Africa, or the Korean peninsula. We have regular

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44. Vasily Kashin, “More Than Partnership: Political Expert Vasily Kashin on the Development of the Political and Economic Relations of Russia and China,” *Vedomosti*, August 18, 2016.

45. Dmitri Trenin, “National Interest, the Same Language of Beijing, Washington, and Moscow,” <http://carnegie.ru/2016/12/29/national-interest-same-language-of-beijing-washington-and-moscow-pub-67631>, December 29, 2016.



and frank and confidential consultations.<sup>46</sup>

Putin's own recent remarks corroborate these statements. Within days after the summit President Putin, at his annual year-end press conference for 2016, stated,

As we know the Sino-Russia relationship is now at its best. We often call it the strategic partnership which I think is not only at a political level but also at the economic one. China is Russia's largest trading partner, although bilateral trade volumes have dropped a little due to the sluggish oil prices. To my delight, our cooperation has continued to diversify. Recently, trade volumes in high-tech and manufacturing fields have grown significantly. The large cooperation projects in aviation, aerospace, energy and nuclear power look promising. — We share common views on a series of international issues. Undoubtedly, it's a key factor in maintaining stability. We cherish the relationship with China and hope to further push it forward.<sup>47</sup>

The trend forecast by Kashin and Trenin and outlined by Putin is already discernible in growing Russian gravitation towards China on the South China Sea and the Korean agendas.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, despite the Russian veto at the U.N., both Russia and China set off to shadow the supposed arrival and travels of the U.S.S. Vinson that supposedly was heading towards Northeast Asia.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the Korean treaty actually increased the Sino-Russian military collaboration that is a bugbear for Japan.

So if Russia will not gravitate away from China, even if modestly,

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46. Ministry of *Foreign Affairs* of the Russian Federation, "Statement and Answers to Questions From the Media by Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov at the Press Conference on the Results of Russia's Chairmanship of the UN Security Council, New York, October 1, 2015," *BBC Monitoring*.

47. Bol'shaya Press-Konferentsiya Vladimira Putina, December 23, 2016, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53573>.

48. Christopher Bodeen, "Russia, China In Agreement On North Korea, South China Sea," *Associated Press*, April 29, 2016; Stephen Blank, "Paradoxes Abounding: Russia and the South China Sea Issue," Forthcoming.

49. "China, Russia Send Ships After U.S. Aircraft Carrier," <http://www.the-japan-news.com/news/article/0003643041>, April 16, 2017, From the Yomiuri Shimbun.

towards Japan and/or not contribute to progress in reducing tensions on the Korean peninsula, then normalization will neither occur nor benefit either party. Russia's closer identification with China will preclude even a modest rapprochement of any substance with Japan. Failure to effect normalization with Japan, apart from whatever deals Moscow makes with Beijing, intrinsically binds Russia to increasing dependence upon China, and prevents it from contributing to improved security in Korea or elsewhere in East Asia. In other words, failure to normalize ties with Japan substantially undermines the stated goal of Russia's Asian policy of enhancing Russia's independent standing in Asia to affect regional trends.

What might be particularly regretful here is that as late as early 2016 Moscow took a hard line on North Korean nuclear testing, possibly in order to signal to Japan a desire to improve relations with Japan. This tactic seemed to have short-term benefits for Russia in improving the atmospherics if not substance of Russo-Japanese ties and in eliciting calls by prominent Japanese politicians such as the Vice President of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party, Masahiko Komura, for deeper economic cooperation and collaboration against the DPRK's violation of UN Security Council resolutions.<sup>50</sup> This episode even led Lavrov to say in January 2016 that both Tokyo and Moscow shared a desire for stability on the Korean peninsula to obtain a "fruitful trade, economic, and investment relationship."<sup>51</sup> In the end, despite North Korea's unremitting threats to Japan and South Korea and the benefits to be had from closer collaboration with Japan and South Korea on the Korean issue, Moscow deferred to China and North Korea.

Thus, the North Korean nuclear and missile program has generated a crisis that also includes Japan and South Korea's acceptance of the THAAD system for very well-founded reasons. These developments as a whole, including the current flare-up of the Korean crisis, have predictably further intensified the regional tendencies towards bipolarity between the rival American and Chinese alliance network and eroded

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50. Samuel Ramani, "Russia, Japan, and North Korea's Nuclear Test, [www.thediplomat.com](http://www.thediplomat.com), January 25, 2016.

51. *Ibid.*

the already slim possibilities for Russo-Japanese collaboration. Seoul clearly had no choice but to respond to Pyongyang's ceaseless provocations and threats and, equally predictably, its decision triggered not just further Sino-Russian unity on Korea and against Seoul and Washington, but also impinged negatively on Russo-Japanese relations.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles are coming ever closer to threatening Japan's air defense zone and territories, including its waters.<sup>53</sup> North Korea is not the only missile threat facing Japan.

More than any other nation in the Western-Pacific, Japan has been proactively procuring and upgrading its BMD capabilities in response to the medium- and long-range missile threats emanating from the DPRK. Additionally, Japan's 2015 Defense White Paper cites Beijing's anti-satellite tests, the expansion of anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities, and the development of hypersonic glide vehicles to overcome missile defenses, as increasing concerns to Tokyo.<sup>54</sup>

Lastly, Seoul's suggestion that it could share missile intelligence and data on North Korean missiles with Washington and Tokyo will further enrage China and lead it to make even firmer demands on Russia than it

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52. Bodeen; Emanuele Scimia, "China and Russia Concerned Over America's Anti-Missile Moves," *Asia Times Online*, August 16, 2016, [www.atimes.com](http://www.atimes.com); Guy Plopsky, "How Russia Is Bolstering Missile Defense In Its Far East," [www.the-diplomat.com](http://www.the-diplomat.com), August 2, 2016; Stephen Blank, "Missile Defense in Korea Further Roils Russo-American Relations," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 22, 2016, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

53. Anna Fifield, "North Korea's Military Buildup Isn't Limited To Its Nukes," [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com), June 7, 2016; Choe Sang-Hun, "Kim Jong-un Hails Firing of Submarine Missile As 'Greatest Success,'" [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com), August 24, 2016; "North Korean Submarine Missile Launch Shows Secretive Program Picking Up Steam," [www.associatedpress.com](http://www.associatedpress.com) August 24, 2016; "North Korea's Submarine Success," *Wall Street Journal*, [www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com), August 24, 2016.

54. Stefan Soesanto, "U.S. Missile Defenses in the Age of Everything: From BMDS to IAMD: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations for the Asia-Pacific Theater," *Issues & Insights*, XVI, No. 6, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016, p. 7.

has in the past not to forge a partnership with Japan. For if intelligence sharing on DPRK threats begins, Beijing and probably Moscow will take it for granted that such sharing will expand to encompass their threats against the U.S. and its allies as well.<sup>55</sup> Given Japanese threat perceptions that would be a logical step for them to take.

At the same time, the Japanese view about the benefits of a deal with Russia does not sufficiently account for the regional security equation. An agreement that would have broken Western solidarity on the sanctions and incline Japan away from the United States would be seen in Pyongyang as validating the North Korean belief dating back several years that the “northern triangle” of China, Russia, and the DPRK is stronger than the U.S. alliance system, that fractures within the latter could be exploited to enhance the DPRK’s security, and that North Korea could proceed in relatively unmolested fashion to full nuclearization.<sup>56</sup>

Certainly, based on previous experience, there is no reason to believe that Moscow will do anything to mitigate Japanese security anxieties, by virtue of Japan’s being in the line of a direct threat from North Korea, e.g. Moscow’s indifference to the abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korea.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Russia’s joining with China in opposing the deployment of the U.S. THAAD missile defense system in South Korea against the North’s missile threats not only chooses China again over a Western orientation, it also reaffirms the Russian government’s belief that those missile and nuclear threats are not serious enough to merit defenses, a stance that is equally offensive to Japan and South Korea.<sup>58</sup> Tokyo also cannot support the Russian belief that the crisis on the Korean peninsula,

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55. Laura Zhou, “Seoul’s Tilt Towards Tokyo Could Lead To Worst-Case Scenario For Beijing,” *South China Morning Post*, August 5, 2016, [www.scmp.com](http://www.scmp.com).

56. *Asan Forum* Gilbert Rozman, “North Korea’s Place in Sino-Russian Relations and Identities,” *The*, IV. No. 6, November-December, 2015, <http://www.theasanforum.org>.

57. Hiroshi Kimura, “Putin’s Policy Toward the Korean Peninsula: Why Is Russia Losing Its Influence?” Hiroshi Kimura, Ed., *Russia’s Shift Toward Asia*, Tokyo: Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2006, p. 164.

58. Stephen Blank, “Missile Defense in East Asia and New Trends in the Russo-Chinese Partnership,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 16, 2016, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

however difficult North Korea is, originates in Washington's threat to unseat the regime in Pyongyang.<sup>59</sup> So a bilateral accord with Moscow offers little tangible security benefits to Tokyo, at least regarding North Korea.

In addition, North Korea's 2016 tests of a hydrogen bomb and of missiles have only tightened alliance bonds among Japan, South Korea, and the United States. This apparently comports with Pyongyang's intentions because it puts greater pressure on China, a classic North Korean move.

The United States also used the North's test to tighten a trilateral alliance with Japan and South Korea, a relationship that China has long viewed as a check on its power. "This is exactly what North Korea wanted," said Go Myong-hyun, a research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul. "If its erratic behavior drives South Korea closer to the United States, China will feel more surrounded, and that will give North Korea room for maneuver."<sup>60</sup>

Similarly the recent Japanese agreement with South Korea on comfort women, also brokered by the U.S., clears the way to even stronger ties with the ROK and more intimate three-way alliance activity, including defense coordination, among Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington. Unfortunately that agreement has subsequently come under enormous pressure given Japan's excessive reaction to a South Korean monument to those women. But that pressure does not vitiate the argument in favor of the intrinsic value of tripartite cooperation among Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington.<sup>61</sup>

Why, under the circumstances, would Japan prefer the illusion of

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59. Stephen Blank, "Russia and the Two Koreas In the Context of Moscow's Asian Policy," *Academic Paper Series*, Korean Economic Institute of America, October 2015, [www.keia.org](http://www.keia.org); "St Petersburg International Economic Forum Plenary Meeting," <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54667>, June 2, 2017.

60. Choe Sang-Hun, "With Nuclear Test, North Korea's Leader Assumes Role of Instigator," *New York Times*, January 8, 2016, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

61. Mintaro Oba, "Japan's Terrible Mistake on 'Comfort Women,'" [www.thediplomat.com](http://www.thediplomat.com), January 14, 2017.

Russian support and investment opportunities and a bad agreement with Russia that breaks the Western united front against Russian aggression in Europe (whose success would only embolden both Beijing and Pyongyang) to the clear security benefits of this strengthened alliance remains quite unclear. Certainly the risk-reward calculus here does not point to the benefits of this which might have been normalization at the expense of allied solidarity. Moreover, to the extent that Russia continues to evade making commitments on the Kurile Islands — Japan's apparent prime objective — unilateral weakening of the anti-Russian coalition for mere intangibles also makes little or no sense in this context. In other words, Russia neither can nor will do much, if anything, to alleviate Japan's security anxieties regarding North Korea (or China) even if they reached an accord on the islands and on normalization. In that case, failure to agree about the Kuriles, a fortiori, precludes any regional gains from Japan regarding Korean issues from any agreement with Russia.

The North Korean crisis also shows why Japan cannot aspire to a successful strategy of somehow being a broker between Russia and the West in return for some of the Kurile Islands because Russo-Chinese coordination on Korea is directed against vital Japanese interests. For Russia and Japan to work together Moscow would have to break with Beijing here and that is not happening. Clearly, under the present circumstances the possibility that Moscow might act in this way is virtually unimaginable. And despite Putin's calls for a "harsh" international response to North Korea, there has not been a strong Russian response.<sup>62</sup> In fact, Ambassador Grigory Logvinov, Moscow's delegate to the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear program, said in 2014, "We don't consider the DPRK's nuclear missile program as a threat to the Russian Federation." Instead Logvinov, undoubtedly representing his government's view, stated that there is a threat to the global nonproliferation regime, producing its negative regional political-military implications — i.e. the impulse it gives to Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo to build missile defenses that threaten Russia, and that it restricts Russian-North Korean

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62. Stephen Blank, "Russia and North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Tests," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 26, 2016.

economic and political relations.<sup>63</sup> Putin's remarks cited above confirm that this is still the reigning attitude in Moscow.<sup>64</sup>

More recently, Russian analysts publicly expressed the view that these tests are merely an attempt to force the U.S. to negotiate with North Korea, presumably implying that they carry no military threat to anyone, particularly the ROK and Japan.<sup>65</sup> In other words, the DPRK nuclear program is a danger, not because it threatens the ROK and Japan but because North Korea's ensuing moves to defend itself against the alleged American threat threaten Russia and Russian interests. Therefore, the crisis is ultimately Washington's fault. This is hardly a basis for genuine Russo-Japanese security cooperation in Northeast Asia. Indeed, the view that drives Russia's Korean policy that despite Pyongyang's pathological state it is the U.S. that is at fault and its ensuing tolerance for the DPRK's nuclear program hardly constitutes a durable basis for a regional Russo-Japanese partnership.<sup>66</sup>

### **Consequences of the Failure to Achieve Normalization: the Korean Issue and Japan**

This outcome obviously is then reflected in bilateral Russo-Japanese relations. Indeed, throughout the entire five-year process there is no sign that Russia made any real, as opposed to purely cosmetic, concessions to Japan. Japan did all the offering including an 8-point economic program and it talked up the possibility of "a new approach" to Russo-Japanese relations. But it got nothing from what was always clearly a process that

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63. Moscow, *Interfax*, in English, November 22, 2014, *Open Source Center, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Central Eurasia*, (Henceforth, FBIS SOV), November 22, 2014.

64. "St Petersburg International Economic Forum Plenary Meeting," <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54667>, June 2, 2017.

65. Blank, "Russia and North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Tests; Stephen Blank, "Missile Defense in Korea Further Roils Russo-American Relations, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 22, 2016, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

66. Blank, "Russia and North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Tests," Blank, "Russia and the Two Koreas in the Context of Moscow's Asian Policy."

was intrinsically difficult to realize and that remains so today.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, the failure to overcome the lack of a peace treaty ending World War II and resolve the issues of the Kurile Islands means that Japan cannot outbid China for Russian support, that Russia expects Japan to make essentially unilateral and unreciprocated concessions to Russia in order to win its trust, and that, in any case the ties to China and the resulting consequences thereof will continue as before. Neither can one count on a perception of economic interests as opposed to regional geopolitical assessments to lead to major improvements in Russo-Japanese ties. Certainly it appears that the economic agreements reached at the December 2016 Putin-Abe summit are mainly agreements to agree, not binding commitments; and if they are ever implemented the burden will fall on Japan, not Russia.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, as we noted above, Gazprom is already looking to delay, if not scuttle, talk of a gas pipeline to Japan.<sup>69</sup>

Once again we are dealing with what would be essentially unilateral and unreciprocated concessions in return for unspecified promises. Economics is not likely to sustain a political rapprochement between these two governments. Once again the old chestnut that Russia and Japan's economies are supposedly complementary to each other has been exposed as false. Even if they were complementary, that fact cannot sustain a failure to move Russia away from its atavistic concepts of Realpolitik. In that case, Japan will still have to face China, perhaps increasingly supported by Russia, and no real progress (unless Beijing changes its Korea policy) will occur regarding Korea.

Japan's government has continued to chase after Russia in the belief that a normalization deal, presumably returning at least two of the Kurile Islands, can be had or at least that it was negotiating seriously about that outcome. Indeed, Abe is still pursuing this dream.<sup>70</sup> One motive for

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67. James D.J. Brown, "Will Abe's New Approach To Ties With Russia Pay Off," *The Japan Times*, October 25, 2016, [www.japantimes.co.jp](http://www.japantimes.co.jp).

68. Kiyoshi Takenaka and Katya Golubkova, "Breakthrough in Japan, Russia Islands Row Eludes PM Abe, Putin," *Reuters*, December 18, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-russia-idUSKBN14504I>.

69. Mazneva and Stapczynski.

70. "Shinzo Abe Plans to Visit Russia In Early 2017," *Business News World*, January 8,



Japan's misperceptions is the continued hankering by any figures in the Japanese establishment for an independent role and policy in Asia freed from the constraints of the alliance with the United States that for many both restricts Japan's freedom of action and may in fact be in decline. The activism of the Abe government in Asia highlights Tokyo's ambition to conduct an independent Asian policy in its own right even if there is also the ever-present important factor of the alliance with the United States.<sup>71</sup> Underlying this increasingly overt ambition is a growing, if still muted, apprehension that Japan in a time of crisis may not be able to rely on the alliance with the U.S. if simultaneous crises occur in Asia and other theaters.<sup>72</sup>

According to this line of thought a deal with Russia that returned at least 2+N of the Kurile Islands, normalized bilateral relations, and constituted a formal peace treaty for World War II might entail breaking ranks with Washington on sanctions upon Russia but it would convert Japan, or at least its proponents argue this way, into a kind of East-West mediator while moving Russia some appreciable distance away from alignment with China.<sup>73</sup> Presumably that deal would also unlock the

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2017, <http://www.businessnewsworld.com/news/shinzo-abe-plans-to-visit-russia-in-early-2017.html>; Akihito Iwashita, "Abe's Diplomacy at a Crossroads: The Hidden Side of the Japanese-Russian Summit," [www.thediplomat.com](http://www.thediplomat.com), May 25, 2017.

71. Michael Auslin, "Japan's New Realism: Abe Gets Tough," *Foreign Affairs*, XCV, No. 2, March-April, 2016, pp. 125-134; Martin Banks, "Japan Seeks More Prominent Role in 'Global Defense and Security,'" [www.defensenews.com](http://www.defensenews.com), February 17, 2016; and for an earlier view see Akihiro Iwashita, "New Geopolitics and Rediscovery of the U.S.-Japan Alliance: Reshaping "Northeast Asia" Beyond the Border," The Brookings Institution, Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies, 2010.
72. John Grady, "Panel: Japan Concerned How U.S. Will Keep Sea Lanes Open If Simultaneous Crises Occur in Asia, Middle East," [www.news.usm.org](http://www.news.usm.org) February 17, 2016.
73. Kazuhiko Togo, "A View From Japan On Japan-Russia Relations In the Mid-2010s: Collapsing Framework and a Way Ahead," in Gilbert Rozman, Ed; *Japan-Russia Relations: Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance*, Washington, D.C. Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2016, pp. 41-50; Tomohiko Tanaguchi, "A Once In Sixty-Year Opportunity? Shinzo Abe's Approach To Vladimir Putin," *Ibid.*, pp. 51-60.

door to major business deals and investment in Russia. This view apparently drives much of Japan's, or perhaps more precisely Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's, policy despite the obstacles that Russia constantly throws up to realizing this policy.<sup>74</sup>

Japan's excessive pursuit of Russia could also reinforce China's proclivity to stonewall Japan given those two countries' steadily expanding number of anti-Japanese military probes with virtual impunity.<sup>75</sup> That pursuit also encourages China to believe it can pressure Russia, as it has done in the past, to desist from normalization lest that antagonize China that Russia cannot afford to irritate. Certainly the Russian government understands that only Putin and Abe together could have resolved the issues blocking normalization of bilateral relations since as Putin said, China and the U.S. are involved, an oblique way of referring to Chinese pressure to block normalization.<sup>76</sup> If Russia thinks it can intimidate Japan, China will think it can do so too and will also think that it can pressure Russia, who is in any case inclined to favor Beijing over Tokyo. Certainly Xi Jinping's September 3, 2015 speech at the anniversary of the end of World War II reeked of anti-Japanese sentiment.<sup>77</sup> Thus, there is a quality of "magical thinking" to Japan's pursuit of Russia even if it accords with Abe's deep-rooted personal ambitions and world view concerning Japan as a challenger to China for leadership in Asia. Indeed, Abe's quick post-summit statement that he would once again go to Moscow in 2017 suggests as much.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, past experience should suggest to Japan the danger of putting too much faith in agreements with Russia. The Japanese govern-

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74. *Ibidem*.

75. Shannon Tiezzi, "China Tests Japan's Resolve Over East China Sea," [www.the-diplomat.com](http://www.the-diplomat.com), October 21, 2015.

76. "Country Report Russia, November 2016," <http://www.theasanforum.org/country-report-russia-november-2016/>, November 24, 2016.

77. "Full Text of Chinese President's Speech At Commemoration of 70th Anniversary Of War Victory," [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-09/03/c\\_134583870.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-09/03/c_134583870.htm), September 3, 2015.

78. "Shinzo Abe Plans To Visit Russia In Early 2017," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, January 8, 2017, [http://rbth.com/news/2017/01/08/shinzo-abe-plans-to-visit-russia-in-early-2017\\_676378](http://rbth.com/news/2017/01/08/shinzo-abe-plans-to-visit-russia-in-early-2017_676378).

ment evidently believes that Russia's August 2014 military exercises in the Kuriles were an affront and violation of a 2013 Putin-Abe agreement to seek a peaceful solution to their contending claims.<sup>79</sup> And Russia's subsequent military moves to reinforce the Kuriles, even on the eve of the 2016 summit hardly showed any change in attitude or willingness to take Japan's claims seriously.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, Moscow's record of violating all manner of security agreements, including those on Syria, Ukraine, and major arms control treaties, hardly augurs well for its future reliability vis-à-vis Japan on Korean or perhaps any other issues. Moreover, a deal with Russia that involves breaking the unanimity of U.S. allies regarding sanctions contradicts the Japanese government's own assessment of the implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, namely that it constitutes a danger to Asia because it creates an example and precedent that China could use against Japan. In 2014, Abe warned the G-7 members that the Russian annexation of Crimea might threaten Asian states like Japan and is thus a threat to the entire international community.<sup>81</sup> At the same time, senior cabinet officer Vice-Minister Yasutoshi Nishimura, warned that Russia's behavior in Crimea resembled that of China in the Senkaku Islands, i.e. unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force.<sup>82</sup> Thus, any deal recognizing Russia's aggression opens a veritable Pandora's Box for Japan vis-à-vis China and Tokyo knows it or at least should know it.

The unfolding consequences of the THAAD decision merely add to an already unfavorable prognosis for Tokyo if it expects that an agree-

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79. Hans Binnendijk, *Strategic Rethink Friends, Foes, and Future Directions: U.S. Partnership in a Turbulent World*, Santa Monica, CA and Washington, D.C.: Rand Corporation, 2015, p. 27.

80. Jeremy Maxie, "Russian Military Moves Risk Japanese Peace Talks and Energy Ties," [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com), March 30, 2016; Franz-Stefan Gady, "Russia To Deploy Missile Systems on Kurile Islands," [www.thediplomat.com](http://www.thediplomat.com), March 28, 2016; "Russia Deploys Coastal Missile Systems On Disputed Kurile Islands," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, November 22, 2016, [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org).

81. Tokyo, *Ijji Press*, in English, March 25, 2014, *Open Source Center, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Central Eurasia (Henceforth FBIS SOV)*, March 25, 2014.

82. Hong Kong, *South China Morning Post*, in English, March 25, 2014, *FBIS SOV*, March 25, 2014.

ment with Russia will facilitate some resolution of the Kurile Islands issue, major economic benefits, and substantive progress on reducing regional security threats. Since any economic benefit that might have accrued for either side is ruled out by the sanctions and Russia's structural economic conditions as well as Japan's permanent reliance on non-Russian energy supporters, the political rationale for moving forward with normalization evaporated over the course of 2014-15 bringing us to the current situation. Ukraine, Syria, the fundamental anti-Americanism of Russian policy, and Russia's growing dependence upon China inhibit any serious rapprochement with Japan. This is the case even though China's support for Russia's position on the Kurile Islands is as lukewarm as Moscow's support for its position on the Senkakus.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, the Obama administration did not favorably tolerate Russian efforts to break up the sanctions regime or Japan's gestures towards Russia, much to Moscow's discomfort, though it is hard to see what it expected from Washington under the circumstances.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, even though it is far too early to discern what the Trump administration's attitude on all the issues involved in the overall process of a Russo-Japanese normalization process will be, they could lead to even more insistent Japanese efforts, especially if Trump's policies amount to saying Washington will explore a deal with Russia and therefore not object to Japan doing so as well.

## Conclusion

Once again it appears that diverging international perspectives and

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83. Remarks of Vasily Kashin, "Prospects for Japan-Russia Relations and Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., November 16, 2015; James D.J. Brown, "Towards an Anti-Japanese Territorial Front? Russia and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Dispute," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, No. 6 (August 2015): 893-915.

84. "Russian Foreign Minister Claims Obama Tried To Stop Japan From Improving Ties With Moscow," *The Japan Times*, January 17, 2017, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/01/17/national/politics-diplomacy/russian-foreign-minister-claims-obama-tried-stop-japan-improving-ties-moscow/#.Wif-LhBsS-o>.

mutual misperceptions by both Moscow and Tokyo will impede efforts to normalize their entangled relationship. But while this will be a blow to Abe's grand design; ultimately it is Russia that will have to suffer the bigger burden of losing another chance to approach Japan and of being alone with China that is itself fostering the growth of an anti-Chinese coalition not only consisting of the U.S. and Japan, but also among Vietnam, Australia, and India. Moscow's delusion that it can simply stonewall Japan and in return be showered with benefits is an even greater delusion than Japan's and the enforced official optimism of so many Russian writers concerning Russia's pivot to Asia reveals just how deep that delusion goes in official Russian circles.<sup>85</sup> Those states' partnerships with Japan, which are already growing and increasingly strategic, will, if they continue, far outweigh the benefits of aligning with Putin's Russia.<sup>86</sup> But Russia, unless it radically changes course, will merely have the honor of increasingly serving China's interests. For a state whose policy in Asia is premised on securing recognition as a great independent power, no more ignominious paradox can be imagined.

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