

Russia and the Korean Peace Process

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The fast-moving diplomacy around North Korea's nuclear weapons demands nimbleness and quick responses to dynamic changes in the relationships among the six interested parties. Yet Russia continues to adhere to long-standing objectives and positions. Consequently, it runs the risk of being further marginalized despite its anxieties to avoid that situation. This paper outlines Russia's vital interests in regard to the Korean Peninsula and its positions on major issues in the current process. It also underscores the fact that Russia's position on Korea is critical to its overall Asian policy. Therefore, because its policy remains immured in past concepts and goals, Russia's Korea and Asian policy are in danger of not being realized. Moreover, its ever-closer alignment if not alliance with China is rendering it less and less important as a factor in Korean affairs. The essay concludes with some remarks as to what the consequences of these processes might entail for Russia and the other parties in their efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue.

Keywords: Russia, North Korea, South Korea, Denuclearization, China

Introduction

The tumultuous twists and turns of what might be called the Korean peace process since 2017 have dramatically shaken up the relationships among the members of the six-party process. Earlier in 2018, the utterly unanticipated outbreak of a Korean peace process replete with unprecedented DPRK-U.S. and inter-Korean summits upended previous calculations among all the members of the six-party process in Korea. As a result, reports from the spring of 2018, when the reality of the Singapore Summit between President Trump and Kim Jong Un materialized, showed that every interested party was trying somehow to join the summit process and improve their ties with Pyongyang at the same time.¹

This frenetic diplomatic activity among the six parties since March 2018 continues and in doing so indicates a continuing turbulence in the process; by September 2018 we seem to have reached a point not far from where all this activity began. Despite three inter-Korean summits by September 2018, the U.S. demands concrete steps towards denuclearization, e.g. an inventory of the DPRK's missiles and capabilities. Indeed, South Korean Foreign Minister Kang-Kung Wha suggested that the U.S. hold off on its demands for such an inventory and move to make peace on the peninsula to induce North Korea to pledge denuclearization.² And South Korea has subsequently agreed to

1. Clint Work, "US-North Korea-South Korea: Three's Company Or a Crowd?," [www.thediplomat.com](https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/us-north-korea-south-korea-threes-company-or-a-crowd/), https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/us-north-korea-south-korea-threes-company-or-a-crowd, June 7, 2018; David Nakamura, "Rival Powers Scramble For Influence Ahead of Trump-Kim Summit In Singapore," https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/rival-powers-scramble-for-influence-ahead-of-trump-kim-singapore-summit/2018/06/06/0ba22b76-68d6-11e8-bea7-c8eb28bc52b1_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.edf43d1f30d0, June 7, 2018; Jeong-Ho Lee and Sarah Zheng, "China, Russia and Japan Seek Seats At the Table With Kim Jong-un, Moon Jae-in and Donald Trump," <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2143328/china-russia-and-japan-seek-seats-table-kim-jong-un>, April 26, 2018
2. Lesley Wroughton and David Brunnstrom, "Pompeo Optimistic Pyongyang Trip Will Yield U.S.-North Korea Progress," [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-idUSKCN1MD2AD), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-idUSKCN1MD2AD>, October 3, 2018

and started implementing confidence-building measures with North Korea as cited below. Meanwhile, North Korea, according to South Korean interlocutors, continues to develop its nuclear program and demand first a formal declaration of an end to the Korean War, all the while protesting its desire to eliminate its nuclear capability by the end of President Trump's term in 2021.³ It continues to assert that it does not have sufficient trust in the U.S. to denuclearize without a security guarantee from Washington.⁴ Indeed, a Russian expert recently told this author among others that no concession from the United States could be large enough or sufficiently credible to induce Kim Jong Un to denuclearize. Therefore, the "peace process" should be built on long-term confidence-building measures while North Korea retains at least some nuclear weapons.⁵ To complicate matters further, the third inter-Korean summit in September 2018 added a new element as the inter-Korean rapprochement continued. Both sides pledged confidence-building mechanisms along their shared border and Pyongyang again announced its readiness to dismantle a nuclear missile site.⁶

Nevertheless, North Korea's pledges fell and still fall far short of what Washington is demanding. But even so, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reaffirmed his willingness to resume negotiations with Pyongyang even as he announced that sanctions would continue until denuclearization is accomplished even though Pyongyang cites

3. "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un Wants To Denuclearize During Trump's First Term: Seoul Officials," <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/06/north-koreas-kim-jong-un-wants-to-denuclearize-by-trumps-first-term.html>, September 6, 2018
4. Margaret Beshar, "DPRK Says Will Not Denuclearize Before More Trust in US," <https://www.voanews.com/a/north-korea-says-will-not-denuclearize-before-more-trust-in-us/4592754.html>, September 29, 2018
5. Meeting with Russian expert who insisted on anonymity, Washington, D.C., November 12, 2018; Konstantin Asmolov, "Complete Denuclearization? Not Before the Korean War is Officially Over," www.valdaiclub.com, August 3, 2018
6. Ankit Panda, "A Productive Fifth Inter-Korean Summit, But Denuclearization Remains Distant," www.thediplomat.com, September 24, 2018; Toby Dalton, "A Challenge and an Opportunity in the Latest Inter-Korean Military Agreement," <https://warontherocks.com/2018/10/a-challenge-and-an-opportunity-in-the-latest-inter-korean-military-agreement/>, October 1, 2018

sanctions as the source of distrust.⁷ Consequently, the overall “peace process” now comprises smaller processes like the inter-Korean talks, and the bilateral U.S.-DPRK negotiations, while also displaying a curious mixture of volatility and stasis. Yet as of today the peace process, despite that volatility, has ironically reached a point not that far removed from where matters stood in 2017. Nevertheless, the intense activity of the six parties involved continues as shown by their mutual interaction and, in particular, North Korea’s intensified diplomatic exchanges with the U.S., South Korea, China, and Russia (there is as yet little sign of direct contacts with Japan) as well as the debate on Korea at the most recent session of the UN General Assembly.⁸ At the same time, the results of the inter-Korean summit in early September 2018 show that the potential for individual parties to move the process in unexpected directions, which forces all the other parties to scramble to keep up, remains a constant possibility. This complicated situation forces each of the involved governments to conduct a highly flexible and nimble diplomacy lest it be left behind or even out of the process even if the key issues are nowhere near resolution at present.

In this context we must constantly assess the objectives and changing tactics of the six parties. Any breakdown in the U.S.-DPRK talks or in the inter-Korean dialogue could derail even the limited progress hitherto made or at least force a reorientation of efforts to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. The possibility of returning to “square one” or to a new beginning in that process obliges us to rethink the vital interests of all the players involved in the quest for peace in Korea. At the same time, moves like the confidence-building measures announced at the September 2018 inter-Korean summit raise the possibility of rapidly changing directions and new possibilities that oblige all the other parties to respond with alacrity or be left behind. This

7. “North Korea Says It Won’t Disarm First, Citing Sanctions as Source Of Mistrust In U.S.,” <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-korea-says-it-won-t-disarm-first-citing-sanctions-n915036>, September 29, 2018

8. “What We’re Watching at the U.N. General Assembly,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/24/world/americas/un-general-assembly.html>

danger of being left behind or left out applies with particular cogency to Russia, as can be seen through an examination of its Korea policy through all the ups and downs of the period since the announcement of the summit in the spring of 2018 to the time of this writing November 2018. Yet despite the points made above concerning the need for the parties to conduct a nimble diplomacy, Moscow remains immured in proposals and perspectives that go back several years.

Russia's Vital Interests in Korea

Russia's primary vital interests in Korea are peace and inclusion. Those interests are equally critical in importance and linked because if Russia is excluded from a Korean peace process it cannot guarantee that either its interests will be safeguarded or that it has any leverage over other actors concerning questions of war and peace. This has been clear to Moscow for some time and that prospect visibly alarms it.⁹ Moreover, if Russia is marginalized in regard to Korean issues, that outcome undermines any pretension to being a great Asian power. Inclusion in any Korean process is important in its own right but also a part of that larger objective of great power status in Asia. That great power status in Asia has become steadily more important for President Putin's government. Indeed, Putin's first initiative in Asia to regain Russia's position was a trip to Pyongyang in 2000 to reestablish Russian standing as a valuable interlocutor for North Korea. Putin already understood then that if Russia is excluded from the Korean dialogue and cannot influence North Korea, it counts for little or nothing in Asia. In other words, Russia's Korea policy is integral to its entire "Ostpolitik" or Asia policy and cannot be understood apart from it.

Peace is equally essential for Russia. Korea has engaged vital Russian interests since the first of the four wars Russia fought over

9. "What We're Watching at the U.N. General Assembly," <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/24/world/americas/un-general-assembly.html>

Korea in the twentieth century.¹⁰ If war breaks out in or over Korea it will likely force Russia, most likely against its preferences, to take sides and possibly become involved in a war where it has no control over any of the protagonists' actions or leverage upon their behavior.¹¹ It then would be dragged into a conflict that began without reference to its interests and that other governments started for reasons having little relevance to Moscow. Indeed, some analysts have opined that the Russo-Chinese exercises "Vostok-2018" and earlier joint exercises reflect both states' reactions to the possibility of a war over Korea.¹²

Moreover, a war in or over Korea is highly detrimental if not disastrous to its major Asian policies. This war will terminate any opportunity to enlist Asian or international help to rebuild Siberia and the Russian Far East (RFE) while possibly drawing those territories and thus Russia into the war. If those lands cannot be developed then the "pivot to Asia" that has characterized much of Russian policy will be destroyed for its premise and priority goal are that Russia can attract foreign investment to help develop Siberia and the RFE. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that Russia be visibly included among the parties who guarantee the peace and the subsequent restructuring of Northeast Asia, if not international security. But the importance of peace does not end here.

Indeed, the issue of Russia's ability or lack thereof to influence

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10. The Russo-Japanese War in 1904, the Soviet-Japanese conflicts in 1938-39, the Korean operation in 1945, and the Korean War where Soviet pilots flew combat missions.
 11. 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; also in Gilbert Rozman, Ed., *On Korea*, 2016: Washington, D.C.: Korean Economic Institute of America, 2016, pp. 60-76
 12. Tom O'Connor, "China and Russia Train for War With U.S. if Trump Invades North Korea," <https://www.newsweek.com/china-could-fight-us-war-north-korea-breaks-out-751779>, December 18, 2017; Kalev Stoiescu, "Vostok-2018: Political and Military Significance," <https://icds.ee/vostok-2018-political-and-military-significance>, September 11, 2018; Damien Sharikov, "Russia Is Preparing For North Korea War As Tensions Rise, Says Putin's Top Security Adviser," www.newsweek.com, December 1, 2017

decisions that reckon with its interests and reduce the likelihood of violence relate very strongly to its other obsession, namely its great power status in both Asia and globally. Beyond the threat to Moscow's Asian policy if it is marginalized or war breaks out, those two outcomes also jeopardize its pretensions to great power status in Asia and globally. Moscow is driven by the quest for great power status as a major Asian player. Indeed, obtaining an acknowledgement of that status is a principal goal of all of its Asian policies as is securing foreign investment to help develop Asiatic Russia. Therefore, it is equally critical to Moscow that Russia be heard, seen, and acknowledged by everyone as an equal player in the six-party process regardless of facts on the ground. In pursuit of that goal a principal tactic of Russian foreign policy has been to try to persuade North and South Korea and the U.S. that Moscow is a principal player in regard to this issue and that it can offer positive steps to any or all of these states because it supposedly has real cards to play regarding Korea, namely its energy supplies, location, and legacy of ties with Pyongyang.

A war in Korea, launched by anyone, not only threatens Russian material and political interests in Asia, but it also threatens the regime at home since the illusion of great power status has become the main domestic prop of a regime mired in domestic stagnation. Since a war or marginalization would show that Russia actually lacks leverage on the parties, it could start a political avalanche at home. Luke Chambers and Vitaly Kozyrev separately observed in 2010 that the president's conduct of foreign policy is a critical aspect of the restoration of both the state and Russia's great power standing abroad, the two key objectives of Putin's policies throughout his tenure in office. Thus actions assessing Russia as an independent, sovereign great power evoke strong public support.¹³ Furthermore, as Kozyrev observes,

Many decisions concerning security issues are related to the factor of *legitimacy of the ruling elite*, rather than the correlation between Russia's

13. Luke Chambers, "Authoritarianism and Foreign Policy: The Twin Pillars of Resurgent Russia," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, IV, No. 2, 2010, pp. 119-120

power and capabilities. Being unable to secure required conditions for a qualitative breakthrough toward an effective economic model and relying increasingly on natural resources for economic growth, the governing groups constantly feel a danger of social unrest and the pressure from competing influential political and business circles.¹⁴

However, because Russia has failed to develop its own Asian capabilities sufficiently and recklessly precipitated what amounts to a war with the West in Ukraine, Russia's overall Asian policies are increasingly also driven by a perfervid anti-Americanism that is, if anything, growing.¹⁵ So beyond increasing alignment with China on many international issues and striving to persuade North Korea of its importance to the North Korean government and despite its proclaimed opposition to nuclearization, Russia will not do much to arrest or stop that nuclearization because doing so would signify support for the Trump Administration's policies. Indeed, it has continued to identify with China's approach that blames the U.S., seeks to mitigate North Korean behavior, and finds excuses for it by referring to the U.S. threat.¹⁶ Furthermore, despite praising President Trump's approach, Putin, once again, has stated that Washington must stop pressuring North Korea to disarm without offering it encouragement, respond to its positive actions, and give North Korea security guarantees in advance of any denuclearization, a long-standing Russian policy and also a non-starter

14. Vitaly Kozyrev, "Russia's Security Policy in Asia in Times of Economic Uncertainty," Paper Presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 2-5, 2010, p. 21

15. "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly," New York, September 28, 2018, http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3359296?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB

16. Gilbert Rozman, "North Korea's Place in Sino-Russian Relations and Identities," <http://www.theasanforum.org/north-koreas-place-in-sino-russian-relations-and-identities>, 2015; Yuri Morozov, "Russia, China, and the North Korean Nuclear Problem," *Far Eastern Affairs*, XLVI, No. 3, 2018, pp. 38-53

from Washington's standpoint.¹⁷ And, despite agreeing to UN resolutions on sanctions for North Korea's continuing nuclearization process, both Russia and China are increasingly openly violating those sanctions.¹⁸ Finally both Russia and China have openly announced their support for North Korea's negotiating position of phased, synchronous concessions by both sides.

Moreover, on October 9, 2018, following the latest visit of U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to North Korea, deputy foreign ministers of Russia, China, and North Korea—Igor Morgulov of Russia, Kong Xuanyou of China, and Choe Son Hui of North Korea—gathered for the first time in Moscow to discuss easing sanctions on North Korea. Summarizing the meetings, Morgulov, stated in a TASS interview that “measures” should reflect “reciprocity, and parallel, synchronous and gradual steps” and emphasized that the situation on the Korean Peninsula would be settled in “accordance with the Russian-Chinese roadmap.”¹⁹

Consequently, if China is encouraging North Korea to resist U.S. pressure for denuclearization as President Trump has suggested, it is quite likely that Russia is also doing so and probably at China's behest.²⁰ Certainly, both states' violations of UN resolutions that they supported regarding sanctions on North Korea are becoming ever more transparent.²¹ Increasingly, Russian analyses of the Korean issue also

17. “Putin Says North Korea Needs More Encouragement,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, www.rferl.org, September 12, 2018; “Putin Says North Korea Doing a Lot To Disarm But Washington Not Responding,” *Reuters*, September 12, 2018

18. Mercy A. Kuo, “China, Russia, and US Sanctions On North Korea,” www.thediplomat.com, November 13, 2018

19. *Ibid.*

20. Cristina Maza, “Donald Trump Blames China for North Korea's Failure to Denuclearize, Beijing Slams President's ‘Irresponsible and Absurd Logic’,” <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-blames-china-north-koreas-failure-denuclearize-and-beijing-slams-1097294>, August 30, 2018

21. “U.S. Warns Russia, China and Others On Enforcing North Korea Sanctions,” <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/un-report-says-north-korea-is-continuing->

blame Washington for North Korea's continuing nuclearization due to its threats against North Korea.²² Therefore Russia has argued, along with China, and to Pyongyang's delight, that Washington must make the first concessions, e.g. ending the state of war on the Korean Peninsula, giving security guarantees, and ceasing its threats while deferring the urgent necessity of denuclearization.²³ Moscow has also shown visible pleasure at the fact that the outcome of the Singapore summit appeared to correspond to it and Beijing's proposal (largely a Chinese initiative) of a so called double freeze or roadmap: North Korea freezing nuclear tests in return for a freeze on U.S.-ROK exercises.²⁴ Yet even though the U.S. and North Korea reached this outcome on their own, it has not led to any dramatic improvement in matters since Singapore nor has it led to any upgrading by the parties of Moscow's importance to the process.

But because Russia has subordinated itself to China for global as well as regional reasons, Russian leaders and analysts know and have to admit, though they are extremely loath to do so, that Russia plays second fiddle to China in Korea.²⁵ For this reason and due to the fact that the Korean parties and the U.S. have managed to sustain a dialogue without any noticeable Russian participation or contribution (quite the

nuclear-and-missile-programs-2018-08-04, August 4, 2018

22. "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks At the UN Security Council Ministerial Meeting On North Korea Settlement Efforts," New York, September 27, 2018, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/general_assembly/-/asset_publisher/lrzZMhfoyrUj/content/id/3354592, September 27, 2018
23. "Putin Says North Korea Needs More Encouragement," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, www.rferl.org, September 12, 2018; "Putin Says North Korea Doing a Lot To Disarm But Washington Not Responding," *Reuters*, September 12, 2018
24. "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Statement and Answers To Media Questions At a Joint News Conference By BRICS Foreign Ministers Following Their Meeting, Pretoria," June 4, 2018, http://www.mid.ru/en/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3248286?novelty-display-dynamic=novelty
25. Artyom Lukin, "Why Russia Is Still Playing Second Fiddle In Korean Geopolitics," <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-second-fiddle-in-korea/>, August 21, 2018; "On North Korea, Trump Has Putin Playing Second Fiddle," *Moscow Times*, June 7, 2018, Johnson's Russia List, June 7, 2018

opposite), marginalization is an ever-present threat and Moscow constantly endeavors to hide this reality by trying to puff up its importance to all the other parties. But, as of this writing, it has had only partial or limited success in doing so. For example, despite numerous public Russian invitations, North Korean ruler Kim Jong Un has yet to meet with Putin despite three summits with Xi Jinping and South Korean President Moon and one with President Trump. Therefore, a considerable amount of Russian diplomacy here is a matter of show, not substance.

Perhaps even more disturbing to Moscow and Beijing is that the development of North Korea's missiles and nuclear weapons justifies and stimulates U.S. deployment of the THAAD missile defense system in and around Korea that they both regard as a threat to their own nuclear weapons and strategy. Clearly Russia lacks political leverage upon North Korea to secure its objectives to dismantle THAAD by prevailing upon Pyongyang to stop its nuclear program. Despite the fact that THAAD is very much a joint U.S.-ROK reaction to North Korea's denuclearization, Russian, if not Chinese pressure on North Korea to denuclearize to secure its interests and those of China are nowhere to be seen. Meanwhile, the DPRK's program provokes the U.S. to build and strengthen its missile defenses with its allies while Moscow continues to run after Pyongyang by blaming America and its threats to North Korea for the crisis. Since Russia lacks any compelling military-political leverage on North Korea or China on these issues, to ensure that it is seen and heard as a major player, it must then emphasize the economic opportunities it claims to possess to build economic linkages with North Korea and thus re-establish its political leverage on North Korea. Absent those economic linkages, it forfeits any hope of influencing or persuading North Korea to accept Russia's core economic proposals for the Korean Peninsula, which have major political significance as well. Moreover, as long as these proposals remain in abeyance, it also stands revealed as a minor player in what it regards as a vital area, an intolerable affront to its great power amour-propre. Indeed, if Russia cannot convince others to take its economic proposal and interests seriously, its Asia project falls apart and it stands revealed

as a secondary if not tertiary player in Asia, an unacceptable outcome.

Because Russia continues to lack any means of political leverage on North Korea, it has no choice, given the overall situation and its own intrinsic anti-Americanism, to continue abetting North Korean proliferation. Like China, Russia simultaneously supports and then covertly violates the UN sanctions that it supported. It disapproves of North Korea's nuclear quest although it will do little or nothing to stop it and has, in fact, abetted it over the years by helping it break sanctions by means of energy transfers to the DPRK.²⁶ Essentially Russian diplomacy engages in a fruitless vicious circle that to a considerable degree is of its own making due to its failure to develop Russian Asia, its alliance with China, and visceral anti-Americanism. And it has thus failed, as Russian analysts have had to admit, to display the requisite nimbleness to enhance its standing during the tumultuous Korean "peace process."²⁷

Given the circumstances, Russia's intention to preserve its economic and thus political connection to North Korea, can only be realized by economic deals with North Korea that then have political repercussions. Therefore, Russia has obsessively pursued the following economic projects in order to enhance its political standing across the region and convince everyone else that it truly has an important and constructive role to play in the six-party or any other process pertaining to Korea. However, U.S. experts like Victor Cha have observed that it plays a "peripheral" role here.²⁸ First Russia has consistently striven to convince the region and now the other five parties of this process of the necessity for a Trans-Siberian-Trans-Korean railway to become a more powerful economic-political player on the Korean Peninsula and facilitate Russia's key role as a medium for intercontinental trade between Europe and

26. Danielle Haynes, "Pompeo, Haley Call Out China, Russia For Oil Transfers To North Korea," https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2018/07/20/Pompeo-Haley-call-out-China-Russia-for-oil-transfers-to-North-Korea/6111532123060, July 20, 2018

27. Lukin

28. Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea Past and Future*, New York: Harper Collins Books, 2013, pp. 345-369

Asia.²⁹ This project dates back to Sergei Witte and the 1890. Indeed, it was one of the causes of Japanese suspicion of Russia's aims in Korea that led to the Russo-Japanese War in 1904. Yet despite the characteristic tenacity of Russian diplomacy revealed in its obsessive quest for this project, it still has not gotten off the ground.

The second and more recent obsession (not too strong a word) revolves around a Trans-Siberian-Trans-Korean gas pipeline to play to Russia's strong suit, i.e. its enormous reserves of oil and gas. But for this pipeline to be built, not only must both Koreas agree to all the complex issues involved, e.g. the route, tariffs, and volume of gas that will go through the pipeline and whether its products may be sold beyond the Korean Peninsula; somebody else will also have to pay for that pipeline's construction and maintenance. As a result, given the inherent complexity of those issues, the unresolved issues between North and South Korea, the overall stagnation of the peace process, and North Korean nuclear intransigence, little has been accomplished. Russia consequently fears being dragged into a war for issues where it has no leverage and by a power over whom it has little control but whose stakes are immensely important to it. A potential third project that has not been pursued with the same tenacity is the possibility of using Russian hydrocarbons or surplus electricity in the Far East to generate a region-wide electricity network comprising Northern China, the Russian Far East, possibly Mongolia, and both North and South Korea. Yet this too has not gotten off the ground.³⁰ Thus, if we give Russia's influence and standing in Korea a cold, hard, unsentimental look, we find that Russia is, to some degree, a marginal wannabe that unjustifiably craves being accepted as one of the major actors equal to the U.S. and China even though it has little to offer or to contribute to sustaining a long-term peace in Korea.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 369

30. This is the subject of a forthcoming article by the author

Russian Policy throughout the Crisis

Therefore, any hint of marginalization represents a red line for Russia with regard to the process of resolving Korean issues. But, under the circumstances, and as shown by the process leading up to the Singapore summit, Pyeongyang does not need Moscow to contact the U.S., negotiate with it, or even make peace as legally Russia is not a belligerent in the Korean War. Indeed, the Singapore process and its aftermath clearly raised the dreaded specter of Russia's marginalization. One sign of this marginalization is the fact that Kim Jong Un has yet to accept Moscow's increasingly desperate pursuit of a summit with him even though he has met with Secretary Pompeo and Xi Jinping thrice. Should the negotiations among the parties break down, some sort of violent event could well take place, and if it assumed the form of a DPRK probe against the ROK, or if Washington moved to preempt Pyeongyang, such moves could also constitute red lines for Russia. Yet it is quite unclear what Moscow can do to arrest those possible outcomes or what it can do to advance the dialogue that still exists. Indeed, its desperation to be taken seriously here led it to propose that it be the mediator between Washington and Pyeongyang, a proposal that has not even merited a public comment in Washington.³¹ And if it continues to side with China to thwart U.S. pressure, then its prospects in the emerging environment are clouded.

Russia, China, and Japan were clearly surprised at the U.S. and North Korean movement towards the Singapore summit and their subsequent moves towards the U.S., and both Koreas underscore those three states' efforts to reassert their interest and standing as participants with vital interests in the outcome of any negotiations. Indeed, one Chinese news report openly warned against feeling marginalized, but that is exactly what Beijing, Moscow, and Tokyo all felt, and evidently still worry about.³² And at one point even China feared being excluded

31. Olivia Beavers, "Russia Willing To Mediate US-North Korea Talks: Report," <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/366458-russia-willing-to-mediate-us-north-korea-talks-report>, December 26, 2017

32. Jeong-Ho Lee and Sarah Zheng, "China, Russia and Japan Seek Seats At the

from peace talks about formally ending the Korean War.³³ Moscow too clearly worries about a peace process excluding it, i.e. bypassing the six-party process and has scrambled to keep up since the process began.³⁴

When it briefly looked like the summit was off on May 24-25, 2018, Moscow's disappointment was palpable. But that disappointment, as reflected in Putin's statement concerning it, displayed more than just fear of exclusion though it did so implicitly and not overtly. Putin's statement reflected Russia's search for a new basis for its Korean policies, Russia's abiding tendency to blame America for whatever goes wrong in Korea, and its adherence to China's policy line even as Chinese influence in and upon North Korea outstrips that of Russia.³⁵ According to Putin,

For his part, Kim Jong Un did everything he had promised, even detonated tunnels and mines at his test site, but then word came of the U.S. decision to cancel the summit. We hope that dialogue will still be resumed and continued and that the summit will take place. Without it, it is hardly possible to hope for tangible progress in resolving an issue that is extremely important not only on a regional but also on a global scale—the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

We will work all together to narrow the gaps between the positions of the U.S. and North Korea. Probably, under the circumstances, it would make sense to return to earlier mechanisms that generally proved useful for making progress on this road.³⁶

Table With Kim Jong-un, Moon Jae-in and Donald Trump," <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2143328/china-russia-and-japan-seek-seats-table-kim-jong-un>, April 26, 2018

33. Jane Perlez, "China, Feeling Left Out, Has Plenty to Worry About in North Korea-U.S. Talks," <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/22/world/asia/china-north-korea-nuclear-talks.html>, April 22, 2018

34. E.G. Artyom Lukin, "From the 'Diplotainment' Of Summits To Six-Party Talks," <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/from-the-diplotainment-of-summits-to-six-party>, June 1, 2018

35. Putin, Macron Hold News Conference in St Petersburg – Transcript, www.kremlin.ru, May 24, 2018

36. *Ibid.*

This statement underscored Russia's lack of ideas or ability to influence the principal players regarding the issues surrounding a summit and forced reliance upon others to lead that process. It also exonerated North Korea even though its diplomats clearly evinced reluctance about planning a summit, a reluctance that was instrumental in President Trump's choice to scuttle the summit.³⁷ Indeed, Trump opined then that China was behind North Korean wavering that caused the postponement.³⁸

Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov's subsequent remarks simultaneously offering to mediate between Washington and Pyeongyang while fully supporting the latter reveal both the inherent duplicity of Russia's policies and also their transparent failure to advance Russian leverage upon the peace process. In fact, according to Russian observers and as noted above, Russian expert opinion, if not the Russian government, leans to the conclusion that North Korea should retain at least a small nuclear deterrent against the U.S.³⁹ Not only did the progress of summit diplomacy leave Moscow out in the cold, it also torpedoed Moscow's earlier efforts to set up a tripartite summit with North Korea and China, a gambit that Pyeongyang only accepted at the last minute and that never came about.⁴⁰ Indeed, as part of Russia's commentary and reaction to the outbreak of the summit, Lavrov, echoing Russian commentators and undoubtedly acting under official prompting, predictably claimed that the process leading to the summit corresponded to the 2017-18 joint Sino-Russian "roadmap."⁴¹ While

37. Mark Laidler, "Trump Pulls Out Of Summit Meeting With Kim Jong-Un," <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/asia/north-korea-trump-summit.html>, May 24, 2018

38. *Ibid.*

39. Meeting with Russian expert who insisted on anonymity, Washington, D.C., November 12, 2018; Asmolov

40. Frolov,

41. "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Statement and Answers To Media Questions At a Joint News Conference By BRICS Foreign Ministers Following Their Meeting, Pretoria," June 4, 2018, http://www.mid.ru/en/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3248286?novelty-display-dynamic=novelty, June 4, 2018; Stephen Blank,

President Trump has frozen U.S.-ROK exercises and North Korea has suspended its tests, it is more likely that this was due to Chinese influence on Kim rather than Russian prompting. That Russo-Chinese program of the double freeze would leave DPRK nuclear weapons in place while reducing readiness if not capability among ROK and U.S. forces. Not surprisingly, Moscow claims other governments' success as its own but that episode also shows that Russian diplomacy still asserts that all of its initiatives are successful regardless of realities, not least the pivot to Asia of which Korea policy is a key element.⁴² Moreover, as of October 2018, Russia, though it was consulted by Pyeongyang, seems to have little say in the bilateral DPRK-U.S. process.

Since the Singapore summit China has managed to reassert itself or at least present an impression to that effect.⁴³ This is also because China feared that it might be marginalized in a U.S.-North Korean negotiation.⁴⁴ But neither Russia nor Japan have garnered much success in re-arranging their relations with North Korea or assuring that Washington will consider their views despite their support for the summit process and intent to cooperate in bringing peace to the Korean Peninsula.⁴⁵ Therefore, Lavrov's visit and statements like Putin's that

"Is There Still a Role For Russia in the Korean 'Peace Process?," Eurasian Daily Monitor, May 14, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/is-there-still-a-role-for-russia-in-the-korean-peace-process/>

42. Alexander Lukin, *Pivot To Asia: Russian Foreign Policy Enters the 21st Century*, New Delhi: Vij Books India PVT LTD, 2016, p. 87; Sergei Karaganov, "Russia's Victory, New Concert of Nations," *Russia In Global Affairs*, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru>, (date accessed on April 3, 2017); Vladimir Petrovsky, "Russia and Asia-Pacific Economic Integration: Seeking a "Point of Entry," *Far Eastern Affairs*, XLIII, No. 4, 2015, p. 10; "Round Table: Relations Between the PRC and the U.S.A. At Present: Prospects and Challenges for Russia," *Far Eastern Affairs*, XLIII, No. 4, 2015 p. 57; Anna Kireeva, "Russia's East Asia Policy: New Opportunities and Challenges," *Perceptions*, XVII, No. 4, Winter, 2012
43. Jeong-Ho Lee and Sarah Zheng
44. Larry M. Wortzel, "China's Role In the North Korean Crisis," *Defense Dossier*, No. 22, December, 2018, pp. 11-12, www.afpc.org
45. Yuki Tatsumi, "Trump-Kim Meeting Is Set. What Now For Japan?," <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/trump-kim-meeting-is-set-what-now-for-japan>, May 16, 2018

North Korea needs “absolute guarantees of its security” indicate Moscow’s desperate desire to be included in the proceedings.⁴⁶ Indeed, one Russian analyst, Andrei Fedorov now claims, in the absence of any supporting evidence, that Russia, China and North Korea agree that if accords are reached with Washington, Russia and China will serve as their guarantors, something that cuts against the grain of North Korea’s unrelenting efforts to free itself from dependence upon those two governments.⁴⁷ And while Moscow may assert this role, nobody has asked it to undertake that mission, and China will certainly not let Russia’s policy supplant it in its self-conceived role as North Korea’s “patron.”

To show who really counts in this process we need to examine the North Korean leadership’s travels. Kim Jong Un has thrice traveled to China while the Chinese Foreign Minister has come to Pyeongyang. But there have been no exchanges with Japan, and there has only been an exchange of foreign ministerial visits between North Korea and Russia with only an invitation for Kim to come to Russia as of November 2018. Although Lavrov during his visit to North Korea and then Putin invited Kim Jong Un to Russia and since Lavrov’s visit represented his first visit to Pyeongyang in a decade, the optics speak for themselves here.⁴⁸ Even though South Korean President Moon came to Moscow and then Vladivostok in September 2018, Russia’s low standing in the regional pecking order and apparent marginalization cast a revealing harsh light upon Russia’s unending proclamations of the success of its Korean and larger Asian policies, i.e. its so-called pivot to Asia. Russia has also essentially spurned South Korean President Moon’s efforts to get Russia

46. “Putin: North Korea Wants ‘Absolute’ Security Guarantee To Abandon Nuclear Arms,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, www.rferl.org, June 7, 2018

47. Mansur Mirovalev, “Russia Attempts To Regain Clout Over North Korea,” <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/russia-attempts-regain-clout-north-korea-180605193845968>; “Putin: North Korea Wants ‘Absolute’ Security Guarantee To Abandon Nuclear Arms,” <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-says-north-korea-wants-absolute-security-guarantee-if-us-wants-to-abandon-nuclear-weapons/29277406.html>, June 7, 2018

48. Tom Balmforth and Josh Smith, “Lavrov Invites Kim To Moscow As Moscow Makes Pyeongyang Play,” www.reuters.com, May 31, 2018

to pressure North Korea into denuclearizing. Instead, it predictably focuses on Moon's parallel efforts to bring about tripartite Russo-DPRK-ROK economic projects like the railway, gas pipeline, or hydroelectric projects, none of which has gotten anywhere yet.⁴⁹ And, apart from not calling for denuclearization, Moscow keeps trying to reduce sanctions before denuclearization has even begun.⁵⁰ So, while it suits North Korea to elicit Russian support for its positions in regard to denuclearization and gaining relief from sanctions, it also is the case that Russia has locked itself into a position that allows it no alternative but to follow China and support North Korea against Washington and Seoul.⁵¹

Russia's marginal status here also raises questions about the value of its alliance with China and the true success of its "Pivot to the East." Indeed, some commentators have opined that Putin actually does not know where Chinese policy is going here.⁵² Therefore, if Russia keeps following China's lead on Korea, it will be hitching its wagon to another uncontrollable great power whose interests diverge from its own and doing so largely because alliance with China enhances its global posture against Washington and domestic economic-political capabilities rather than enhancing its standing in Asia.

Russian leaders and experts may well believe that, "In general, the cooperation with China on a wide spectrum of policies objectively strengthens Russia's positions on the international arena as an independent center of power."⁵³ However, that proposition actually means that Russia cannot play a role in world politics beyond what

49. Chang May Choon, "N. Korea a Key Topic In Moon's Moscow Visit," *The Straits Times*, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/n-korea-a-key-topic-in-moons-moscow-visit>, June 21, 2018

50. "Russia Seeks To Lift Bank Sanctions On North Korea-U.S. Ambassador to UN," www.en.censor.net.ua, November 9, 2018

51. Min-Kyung Jung, "N. Korea, China, Russia to Hold Trilateral Consultations On Denuclearization," www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20181007000154, October 7, 2018

52. Pavel K. Baev, "Putin Tries to Exploit Anti-Trumpism to Advance His Economic Agenda," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, May 30, 2018, www.jamestown.org

53. Alexander Lukin, *Pivot To Asia: Russian Foreign Policy Enters the 21st Century*, New Delhi: Vj Books India PVT LTD, 2016, p. 87

China will allow it to do. In the cold light of contemporary events concerning North Korea, that assessment may need revision for Russia has clearly been marginalized throughout this process and knows it. Likewise, this process to date also raises serious questions concerning the validity of the chorus of approbation surrounding Moscow's "pivot to the East" as described by Russian experts.⁵⁴ Indeed, Daniel Drezner has recently related that Russian experts in private think rather little of the so-called success of Russia's Asia policy describing it as largely a mirage.⁵⁵

Russia's Overall Korea Policy and the Korean Summits

More specifically, the train of events around North Korea since 2017 shows that, despite over a decade of strenuous efforts, Moscow has rather little to offer to North Korea, or anyone else, to engender peace and denuclearization in Korea. Nor does North Korea highly rate its potential influence or ability to contribute meaningfully to that outcome. Certainly there has hitherto been little progress towards realizing the 2011 agreements between Kim Jong Il and President Dmitry Medvedev concerning economic deals and Russia's century-long dream of a Trans-Siberian-Trans-Korean railway while the more modern proposal for a Trans-Siberian-Trans-Korean gas pipeline remains on paper.⁵⁶ Although Moscow will likely try to persuade South Korean President Moon to relaunch these initiatives during his Moscow trip, it is up to Kim Jong

54. *Ibid.*; Anna Kireeva, "Russia's East Asia Policy: New Opportunities and Challenges," *Perceptions*, XVII, No. 4, Winter, 2012; Petrovsky; Karaganov, etc.

55. Daniel W. Drezner, "Spoiler Alerts Went To Moscow, and All You Get Are These Lousy Observations," https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/05/30/spoiler-alerts-went-to-moscow-and-all-you-get-are-these-lousy-observations/?utm_term=.4bd93a25239d, May 30, 2018

56. Stephen Blank, "Making Sense of Russo-North Korea Relations," Gilbert Rozman and Sergei Radchenko Eds., *International Relations and Asia's Northern Tier, Sino-Russian Relations North Korea, and Mongolia*, Palgrave Macmillan: Springer, Singapore, 2017, pp. 283-299

Un who has yet to show tangible support for them.⁵⁷ South Korea's support for such proposals is irrelevant as long as the North refuses to make progress on them. While the sanctions regime being applied to North Korea has visibly eroded since the Singapore summit, Russia remains relatively unable to exploit that situation to push those projects forward for all of its support for violating the sanctions.⁵⁸

The Korean issue and the Arctic

The Korean Peninsula is particularly important to Russia because these large-scale economic projects possess correspondingly large potential political payoffs. Moscow is playing for very high economic-political stakes in Korea but failure to capitalize politically on its "investments" in North and South Korea entails its further marginalization if a genuine "peace process" develops there. Lastly, failure to register here as a great power affects other crucial areas of Russian policy like the Arctic, given the importance of Korean ports to transcontinental trade between Europe and Asia through the Arctic and the Arctic's critical importance to Russia's future. As Alexander Korolev wrote in 2016 about then South Korean President Park's Eurasia Initiative,

Park's "Eurasia Initiative" highlights extending transportation, energy and trade networks that connect the Pacific coast to Europe and its capacity to engage North Korea and becomes an indispensable element of this geopolitical model. South Korea's rail network is supposed to be linked with the Trans-Siberian railway, and new energy cooperation must link energy infrastructures, including electricity grids, gas and oil pipelines, and co-developing China's shale gas and Eastern Siberia's petroleum and gas. This can stimulate trade and, more importantly, provide material foundations for reforms in North Korea and, eventually Korea's

57. "South Korean President To Visit Russia In June-Reports," www.tass.com/world/1008664, June 8, 2018

58. Mark Laidler, "Trump Veers To a Korea Plan That Echoes Failures Of the Past," www.nytimes.com, June 3, 2018

unification.⁵⁹

Some South Korean experts argue that when the Trans-Siberian and a trans-Korean railway are united along with the opening of a trans-Siberian-trans-Korean gas pipeline, and Korean ships can go to the Arctic through the Russian Far East, this initiative will be realized.⁶⁰ Also in this context the successful completion of a pilot project connecting Khasan in Russia and Rajin in North Korea's Special Economic Zone by rail and rebuilding the port of Rajin is a significant development.⁶¹ Russian writers also cite other infrastructural projects with North Korea, the settlement of its debts to Russia and willingness to trade bilaterally in rubles as signs of progress.⁶²

Undoubtedly, the Arctic connection through Korea possesses considerable importance to Russia, but China and South Korea have already preceded it here despite these aforementioned projects. Beijing, like Moscow, long ago grasped the desirability of access to North Korean ports to exploit the Arctic commercially. Moscow fears that China may use the Rajin port to gain access to the Arctic and thereby minimize its commercial exposure in the developing Northern Sea Route (NSR). Meanwhile, China has also gained access to another North Korean port at Chongjin on the East China Sea. While China is interested in the DPRK's ports to gain access for its northeastern provinces, the Arctic connection is clearly not far from Russia's mind as Russian analysts observe.

The most significant Arctic-related shipping development in China is the leasing of North Korea's port Hunchun Chuangli Haiyun Logistics Ltd,

59. Alexander Korolev, "Russia's Reorientation to Asia: Causes and Strategic Implications," <https://poseidon01.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=6850050980860241121211191140281080650500360050070200230981000160750251130180221150060570310080341100260400201011200241250860980510200030050850691081150021271180111180210100850910701140930691130071071210710841180740701010281240800050900089095064083093069&EXT=pdf>, 2016, p. 3

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4

62. *Ibid.*; Blank, "Making Sense of Russo-North Korea Relations," pp. 283-299

based in neighboring Jilin province, in northeastern China. Rajin lies on the far northeastern tip of North Korea, near its border with Russia. The company is private, but the lease was agreed on “in cooperation with six Chinese ministries and the Jilin provincial government.” In 2008, a 10-year lease was signed for Rajin’s Pier 1. This granted China access to the Sea of Japan for the first time since 1938. Although the Arctic was not mentioned in media reports about the lease, Chinese scholars presumably view Rajin as a potential Arctic hub. According to several Chinese analysts, the opening of Arctic shipping routes will be beneficial for the Tumen river area. In late 2011, the lease was extended for another 20 years. A year later, Hunchun Chuangli’s parent company, Dalian Chuangli Group, was granted 50-year leases on Rajin’s Piers 4, 5 and 6.⁶³

Chinese observers feared exclusion from this Russian-DPRK project. Professor Zhou Yongsheng, at the Institute of International Relations of China Foreign University, urged China’s inclusion in the project.⁶⁴ Now that the Russia-DPRK project is suspended and China’s Arctic reach is growing, its economic primacy in foreign economic ties to North Korea is uncontested and a major factor of its leverage over the entire complex of North Korean issues. Meanwhile, Russia has just cut its spending on Arctic transport infrastructure by 90%.⁶⁵ In other words, even before 2018, China had preempted Russia here.

For South Korea, however, the political objective is a thriving relationship with Russia that will allow it unimpeded access to Arctic shipping routes and help facilitate North Korea’s eventual return to the community of nations. But the economic vision far transcends the eventual reintegration of North Korea. As Mia Bennett writes,

Essentially, South Korea can be seen as part of an enlarged zone of Arctic destination trade that includes the areas beyond the Arctic Ocean’s littoral, stretching from the ports of northern Scandinavia, around the coast of the Russian Far East and Sakhalin, and down into the ports of Northeast

63. Linda Jacobson and Jingchao Peng, “China’s Arctic Aspirations,” *Sipri Policy Paper*, No. 34, 2012, pp. 7-8, www.sipri.org

64. Yonhap, in English, November 28, 2013, FBIS SOV, November 28, 2013

65. Stephen Blank, “The Bloom Comes off the Arctic Rose,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, www.jamestown.org, July 20, 2017

Asia.⁶⁶

Along similar lines, Young Kil Park, Director of the International Maritime Affairs and Territory Research Center at the Korean Maritime Institute (KMI), advocated developing a strategic plan to connect the East China Sea, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Arctic Ocean with a coinciding land-based approach to integrate communities near the East China Sea like Mongolia, the Russian Far East, and Northeast China. As Bennett observes, “Park’s views encapsulate the desire in some Korean policy circles to further integrate the country into its regional neighborhood by sea and land as a means of building a foothold into the nearby Arctic, the problem of North Korea, notwithstanding.”⁶⁷

The Arctic’s energy riches are also of much interest to South Korea since it is the fifth largest importer of crude oil and second largest importer of LNG. Because most of these imports depend upon transiting the already contested Straits of Hormuz, the NSR holds much promise as an alternative for South Korea and other Asian states. South Korea already possesses a large fleet of LNG tankers since pipelines are not in the offing anytime soon. Improved ties to Russia make great sense in this context.⁶⁸ While Russia obviously benefits from this trend, it has not progressed much under the new South Korean government, and South Korea benefits much more than does Russia, especially as the U.S. is apparently entering in a big way into the Asian energy market and will compete with Russia for market share.⁶⁹ Likewise, President Trump’s apparent dismissal of a large U.S. economic program for North Korea opens the way to Chinese preponderance in any postwar economic reconstruction there, hardly a desirable outcome for Russia.⁷⁰

66. Mia Bennett, “The Maritime Tiger: Exploring South Korea’s Interests and Role In the Arctic,” *Strategic Analysis*, XXXVIII No. 6, 2014, p. 892

67. *Ibid.*, p. 893

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 893-895

69. Yasuo Takeuchi and Ryosuke Hanafusa, “US Shale Gushes Into Asia,” <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/US-shale-based-LNG-gushes-into-Asia>, May 22, 2018

70. Jane Perlez, “A Trump-Kim Deal Could Send China’s Trade With North Korea Soaring,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/05/world/asia/china-north->

Korea and Russia's Pivot to the East

These outcomes too highlight Russia's inability to develop a competitive or particularly attractive profile for either Korea or Asia in general that would then allow it to play a critical role in any Korean peace process and stands in glaring contrast to China's success in doing so. To be sure, Russia has significantly expanded its trade with all of the countries of Northeast Asia, and the share of its trade going to Asia is clearly in sight of the goal of eclipsing its trade with Europe. So Moscow is realizing its long-proclaimed option of reorienting the bulk of its trade, which in fact is mainly energy, to Asia at the expense of Europe.⁷¹ While Russian diplomacy since the announcements of the inter-Korean and Kim-Trump summit has scrambled to catch up and asserted the success of Russian policy, the reality is clearly much different.

Moscow's inability to affect the Korean "peace process" significantly is all the more telling because after China, Korea is the most promising venue for Russia's "pivot to the East" and peace in Korea is obviously the most urgent as well as critically important issue in East Asian security.⁷² In that context, Moscow's relative unimportance to the process is a telling riposte to all the Socialist realism-like analyses emanating from Moscow attesting to the great success of Russia's Asian policies.⁷³

Lavrov's 2018 visit to Pyongyang shows just how much Russia is trying to catch up to China and avert its marginalization here. Lavrov predictably invited Kim Jong Un to Moscow, echoed Kim Jong Un's approach that any denuclearization be phased over time, and denounced sanctions and said they should precede denuclearization,

korea-trade.html, June 5, 2018

71. Michael Corbin, "A Russian Pivot to Asia? Russian Trade With Asia From 2006-2016," *Kennan Cable*, May 2018, No. 33, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-33-russian-pivot-to-asia-russian-trade-asia-2006-to-2016>

72. Alexander Lukin, p. 4

73. Kireeva, "Russia's East Asia Policy: New Opportunities and Challenges," *Perceptions*, XVII, No. 4, Winter, 2012; Petrovsky; Karaganov

which is a pipe dream. Meanwhile, Moscow continues, as it has long done, to violate the sanctions that it voted for in the UN.⁷⁴ In his efforts to upgrade Russia's role on the Korean Peninsula, Lavrov again offered Russia as a mediator between Pyeongyang and Washington. In addition, according to Lavrov,

We discussed certain steps that can be made towards this, including the old idea of launching trilateral projects between the two Koreas and Russia to link their railway networks and to build a gas pipeline as well as energy projects. The desire to re-unite the railway systems expressed by the leaders of North Korea and South Korea at their meeting in Panmunjeom has given a new lease on life to these trilateral cooperation initiatives.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, he and numerous other Russian analysts reiterated the argument that peace can only come through a rejuvenated six-party process, where Moscow plays an equal part to the other countries in Northeast Asia and peace comes only through a step-by-step process that leads to a restructuring of Asian security in general even though Russia was not a belligerent in the Korean War and lacks legal standing to sign a paper formally ending that war. Specifically, he observed that,

Russia was involved in the six-party talks on the North Korea issue—a mechanism that was still there. In accordance with the logic that this mechanism is based on, we support the current changes in relations between the two Koreas, as well as between Pyeongyang and Washington. It will require step-by-step actions, consistency and patience. At the final stage of the process, multilateral talks involving all the six countries will become inevitable, which is what the Russian-Chinese road map implies. The denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula should be supported by mechanisms ensuring peace and stability in Southeast Asia.⁷⁶

74. "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers To Media Questions Following Talks With Foreign Minister of North Korea Ri Yong-ho," Pyeongyang, May 31, 2018, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3240604, May 31, 2018

75. *Ibid.*

76. Jeong-Ho Lee and Sarah Zheng

Naturally, under the circumstances, Kim Jong Un was happy to complain to Lavrov about U.S. "hegemonism."⁷⁷ But that only entails a promise to exchange views with Russia.⁷⁸

Nevertheless, Kim does not need Russia nor possibly even China to communicate with Washington although his visits to China suggest greater reliance on China. Neither does he currently need a mediator. Or if he does it will not be Russia and more likely it will be South Korea who has already stepped into that breach.⁷⁹ While he clearly would like to have Russian support for issues like sanctions and denuclearization, he does not need a mediator, least of all Russia. Indeed, the presumption that another mediator is needed derives from the belief that the summit and its aftermath will go so badly that neither side will be able to communicate effectively with each other or through someone other than Russia. So, despite Putin's continuing offer of Russian mediation services, neither assumption is presently warranted or likely to be fulfilled anytime soon.⁸⁰ In any case, it is hardly likely that Washington will then solicit Russian mediation given Moscow's utter duplicity on this and so many other issues. Moreover, President Trump has accepted the need for some sort of longer temporal process, presumably a phased one for denuclearization, if not for any reason other than because the verification process is so difficult in North Korea and trust so lacking.⁸¹

77. "Kim Jong Un Complains Of U.S. 'Hegemonism' To Russia's Sergey Lavrov," <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/kim-jong-un-complains-of-u-s-hegemonism-to-russias-sergey-lavrov-today-2018-05-31/>, May 31, 2018

78. *Ibid.*

79. Sang-Hun Choe, "Pompeo Trip to North Korea Yields New Summit Meeting, South Korea Says," <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/pompeo-trip-to-north-korea-yields-new-summit-meeting-south-korea-says/ar-BBO4dcp>, October 7, 2018

80. "Moscow Ready To Act As Mediator Between US, North Korea, Says Kremlin," <http://tass.com/politics/983093>, December 26, 2017

81. John Wagner, "Trump Says He Might Accept a 'Phase-In' Of North Korea's Denuclearization," https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-says-he-might-accept-a-phase-in-of-north-koreas-denuclearization/2018/05/24/067cd2de-5f37-11e8-a4a4-c070ef53f315_story.html?utm_term=.e36d80258388, May 24, 2018

And Secretary of State Pompeo has recently reaffirmed that point, essentially abandoning any particular timeline for denuclearization.⁸² In other words, Lavrov's proposals were essentially propaganda and his audience was as much Pyeongyang and Beijing as it was Washington. So, in large measure, his trip exemplified the Russian tendency to emphasize show over substance in its Korean and Asian diplomacy.

Enmity with Washington and the Pro-Chinese Tilt

As we have argued throughout this paper, Russia's Korean policy is intertwined with or part of its broader "pivot to Asia" and its overall policies towards the U.S. Clearly the preeminent aspect of the "pivot to Asia" is the Russo-Chinese alliance.⁸³ While calling this relationship an alliance evokes academic criticism, Alexander Korolev has cogently argued that the arguments that no alliance can or does exist are based on mythologies that are easily shattered when one examines the real progression of the Russo-Chinese relationship.⁸⁴ And the Vostok (East)

82. "Pompeo Backs Away From Denuclearization Goal For North Korea," <https://www.wvlt.tv/content/news/Pompeo-backs-away-from-denuclearization-goal-for-North-Korea-495079891.html>, October 3, 2018

83. Most analysts do not accept that there is an alliance, and the two governments call it a comprehensive strategic partnership. But for an argument advancing the idea of an alliance see, Stephen Blank, "The Dynamics of Russo-Chinese Relations," Sumit Ganguly, Andrew Scobell, and Joseph Chinyong Liow, Eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Asian Security Studies*, Second Edition, London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 74-87; Stephen Blank "Russo-Chinese Relations In Strategic Perspective," Gilbert Rozman and Sergei Radchenko Eds., *International Relations and Asia's Northern Tier, Sino-Russian Relations North Korea, and Mongolia*, Palgrave Macmillan: Springer, Singapore, 2017, pp. 93-108

84. Alexander Korolev, "The Strategic Alignment Between Russia and China: Myths and Realities," Lee Kwan Yew School of Public Policy Papers, Working Paper No. LKYSPP 15-19, 2015, <https://poseidon01.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=031091004086065016111093067096108018021040001044049026109104125095110025031123124110101005043014122099042089123013108076090095052020066046041116080103113113113068031040084075121094065074070009084077120091087006099070112091090022027064105026120015101073&EXT=pdf>; and author's conversations with U.S. analysts and officials, 2017-18

2018 Russo-Chinese military exercises led many Russian analysts to say publicly that they reflected bilateral alliance between those two governments.⁸⁵

Sino-Russian intimacy clearly affects all the relationships that comprise the Korean nuclear and other issues. First of all, Russia's inability to compete effectively with China for influence over North Korea despite its consistent aspiration to upgrade its standing in Pyongyang's eyes not only lets North Korea play them off against each other, it also permits Pyongyang to believe that rhetoric aside, Russia and China will have its back and prevent any truly terrible outcome. Thus the evidence is overwhelming that even as they vote for sanctions, Moscow and Beijing are still covertly supplying North Korea.⁸⁶ Indeed, China may be manipulating the sanctions weapon to bring North Korea back under control.⁸⁷ Yet at the same time, North Korea, with good reason, trusts neither China nor Russia. This mistrust is of long standing.⁸⁸ Certainly one reason for going nuclear is to emancipate North Korea from China's tutelage.

Consequently, Russia has long rhetorically opposed North Korean proliferation while believing and saying that it is Washington's fault for threatening North Korea that it has gone nuclear and therefore

85. This alliance is the subject of a forthcoming work by the author

86. Nick Wadhams and Jason Koutsoukis, "Pompeo Warns Russia, China Over Violating North Korea Sanctions," <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-04/pompeo-warns-russia-china-over-violating-north-korea-sanctions>, August 3, 2018

87. Samuel Ramani, "Why Russia Is Openly Violating Sanctions Against North Korea," https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/04/20/why-is-russia-openly-flouting-international-sanctions-against-north-korea/?utm_term=.dd1dca53413a, April 23, 2018; Samuel Ramani, "China's Approach to North Korea Sanctions," www.thediplomat.com, January 10, 2018

88. Balasz, Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung In the Khrushchev Era: Soviet DPRK Relations and the Roots Of North Korean Despotism, 1953-1964*, Washington, D.C. and Stanford, California: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2005; "North Korean Attitudes Toward China: A Historical View of Contemporary Difficulties," <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/north-korean-attitudes-toward-china-historical-view-contemporary-difficulties>, April 6, 2009

Washington must make concessions.⁸⁹ Moreover, despite its rhetoric about opposing nuclearization and desire not to have new nuclear states arrive that would devalue its nuclear status and cause perennial crises, Russia remains unwilling to do anything about North Korea's nuclear program.⁹⁰ As relations with America have deteriorated, this increasingly open anti-Americanism has come more overtly to the fore of Russia's position on Korea and it is tied to the alliance with China.

As we have noted, for many Russian observers and officials, even going back to Yeltsin, a primary purpose, if not the primary purpose of the ever-growing intimacy with China that arguably has now become an alliance is to enhance Moscow's ability to stand up to Washington.⁹¹ Yet since the invasion of Crimea and the imposition of sanctions, it has had no choice but to become China's ally, a role in which it is visibly more dependent on Chinese economic and political support. Thus today, despite six years of intense discussions launched by the Abe government in Tokyo, Russian relations with Japan have made little if any substantive progress either economically or politically.⁹² Both governments may intend to cooperate to bring peace to Korea, but actually they have both been marginalized here, and Tokyo effectively must rely on Washington to advance its interests on the peninsula.⁹³

Meanwhile, in regard to the overall agenda of Asian security, Russia is ever more inclined to follow China's agenda be it in the South China Sea or Korea.⁹⁴ The so-called roadmap that the two governments

89. Stephen Blank, "Making Sense of Russo-North Korea Relations," Gilbert Rozman and Sergei Radchenko Eds., *International Relations and Asia's Northern Tier, Sino-Russian Relations North Korea, and Mongolia*, Palgrave Macmillan: Springer, Singapore, 2017, pp. 283-299

90. *Ibid.*

91. E.G. Alexander Lukin, *passim*, but note in particular the Yeltsin quote on p. 275

92. Daniel Hurst, "Abe's Russia Trip Comes to An Underwhelming End," www.thediplomat.com, June 1, 2018; James D.J. Brown, "Abe's Russias Trip Highlights Foreign Policy Failings," www.asia.nikkei.com, May 31, 2018

93. *Ibid.*

94. Stephen Blank, "Paradoxes Abounding: Russia and the South China Sea Issue," Anders Corr, Ed., *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game In the South China Sea*, Annapolis, MD. Naval Institute Press, 2018, pp. 248-272

advanced in 2017-18 regarding Korea did nothing to arrest nuclear proliferation while it did aim to reduce U.S.-ROK capabilities and readiness and was thus a non-starter. For all its rhetoric of partnership with the current South Korean government, work on the major projects of Park's Eurasian Initiative, which clearly has major repercussions for North Korea and its future ties to South Korea and Russia, has not begun. Neither is there anyone in Washington who will trust Moscow as far as Korea is concerned. Indeed, even President Trump, perhaps the most pro-Russian figure in the Administration, expressed suspicion concerning Lavrov's mission in Pyongyang (and probably with good reason).⁹⁵

Conclusions

The consequences of Moscow's failure to register a strong impression on what is Asia's most urgent security issue transcend the Korean Peninsula. In the South China Sea, China demands the surrender of Rosneft and by extension the Russian government to its demands for a veto over all drilling projects in those waters, something that contradicts important and long-standing Russian interests in Southeast Asia and with its partner, Vietnam.⁹⁶ On the critical issue of China's Belt and Road Initiative and the supposed tie-in to the Eurasian Economic Union, the keystone of Putin's vision of Eurasian integration, the evidence suggests that rhetoric aside, China will exclude Russia from all but a few crumbs of the rich opportunities that are potentially going to open up in regard to the vision of intercontinental trade and Eurasian

95. "Trump 'Did Not Like' Meeting Between North Korean Leader & Russian Foreign Minister," <https://www.rt.com/usa/428503-trump-like-lavrov-kim>, June 1, 2018; Fred Weir, "As Singapore Summit Nears, Russia Worries Trump and Kim Won't Cut a Deal," *Christian Science Monitor*, www.csm.com, June 6, 2018

96. "China Challenges Rosneft Drilling In Disputed Waters," Retrieved From *BBC Monitoring*, June 7, 2018

economic integration.⁹⁷ And as we have seen, China has long since preempted Russia in the race to gain access to Korean ports and intercontinental trade through the Arctic. Likewise, Russia's marginal standing in the Korean crisis comes through clearly when the process is closely scrutinized.

As noted above, the fundamental purpose of Russia's Korean policy is to preserve peace in Korea and Asia generally, as peace is indispensable to any development of Siberia and the RFE on the basis of foreign and domestic trade and investment. Peace is in turn a necessary precondition for Russia to play the role it covets in East Asia. Only if Russia can play the role of peacekeeper can it actively help create and sustain the multipolar world that its officials and analysts either believe exists or should come into being. Accordingly, Moscow's Korean policies are not just part of its overall Asian program but are also an essential component of promoting this multipolar world order. Only in this context can we fully grasp Moscow's goals and motives on the Korean Peninsula.

For Russia, the Korean Peninsula appears to be particularly key and the Six-Party Talks, by virtue of their inherent multilateral design, formally embody key requirements and preconditions for multipolarity. Russian officials acknowledge that Asia is not only the dynamo of the global economy but also postulate an emerging "polycentric world order" largely composed of rising Asian powers.⁹⁸ Furthermore, Russian leaders insist that the West is declining and that the Asian powers (among whom it includes itself) are rising.⁹⁹ However, Russian foreign policy aims to consolidate Russia's position as what Foreign Minister Lavrov calls a premier center of power and influence of the new

97. Stephen Blank, "Russia's Pivot To Asia: The Multilateral Dimension," National Bureau of Asian Research, June 28, 2017, http://www.nbr.org/downloads/pdfs/eta/workingpaper_Blank_062817.pdf

98. Sergei Lavrov, "Russia and ASEAN Can Do a Great Deal Together," *International Affairs*, LVI, No. 6, 2010, pp. 13-14

99. "Russian FM Sees End of Western Dominance in Economy, Politics," www.china.org.cn, August 25, 2015

polycentric system despite constant Western resistance to this trend.¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, Russian writers have long viewed Western policies as manifestations of the desire to prevent Russia's supposedly foreordained rise and preserve unipolarity. As the Valdai Club stated in 2009,

Russia views itself as a pole of a multipolar world, which conducts independent domestic and foreign policy based on its own interpretation of national interests and its own model of development. At the same time, Washington's global strategy boils down to a search for ways of restoring unipolarity by this or that means.¹⁰¹

Accordingly, Russian leaders led by Putin, invoke U.S. decline and Russia's rise claiming that, "We do not want to return to confrontations between blocs. We do not want to split the world into various military and political groups. But Russia has sufficient potential to influence the construction of a new world system."¹⁰² Thus Russia is a "system-forming" power in its own right, both globally and in Asia.¹⁰³ Not content with merely a regional role, Russia sees itself as an integral global power that is essential to constructing this global order. Or as Sergei Yastrzhemskiy, Putin's foreign policy advisor said in 2007, "Russia should play its role whenever we have relevant interests."¹⁰⁴

Yet events have shown that Moscow is hardly a "system-forming power" in Northeast Asia unlike China and the U.S. Not only does

100. Moscow, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, in Russian, January 23, 2013, FBIS SOV, January 23, 2013

101. Sergei Karaganov, Timofei Bordachev, and Dmitri Suslov, Eds., *Reconfiguration, Not Just a Reset: Russia's Interests in Relations with the United States of America*, Moscow: Valdai Discussion club, 2009, p. 10

102. President Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security," February 10, 2007, www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138

103. Paradorng Rangisaporn, *Russia As An Aspiring Great Power in East Asia: Perceptions and Policies From Yeltsin to Putin*, London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009

104. "Interview With Sergei Yastrzhembskiy," Moscow: *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, in Russian, February 22, 2007, Open Source Center, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Central Eurasia* (Henceforth FBIS-SOV), February 22, 2007

North Korea not need Moscow to talk to Washington or Seoul but also even if Kim feels he needs Chinese support as his three visits may suggest, that will not directly benefit Moscow. China clearly still retains a major influence on North Korea, as Kim Jong Un's three visits there suggest, and it may have used its influence to engage in what ended as a temporary setback to the process.¹⁰⁵ By virtue of its economic and military power, China will undoubtedly continue to play a major role in the ultimate disposition of the issues arising out of the "peace process." But we cannot say the same about Russia. Even if the various infrastructural programs materialize, the Trans-Siberian and Trans-Korean railways and gas pipeline, somebody will have to foot the bill, and it is unlikely Russia can do that now any more than it could fifteen years ago.¹⁰⁶

On the other hand, as is the case elsewhere, Moscow retains the formidable capability, along with Tokyo, to play the role of a spoiler and disrupt progress towards a peaceful resolution of the current Korean knot of issues.¹⁰⁷ Japan most likely has no appetite to play that role given the danger posed to it by China and a resurgent North Korea if things go wrong. But playing the spoiler is a role that comes naturally to Russia whether in Europe or elsewhere. Hitherto, it has not played that role in Northeast Asia due to weakness, and the fact that this is the only region where it directly collides or must contend with the vital interests of both China and the U.S. But that does not mean that if it is sidelined from the future proceedings that it will not resort to some such action rather than just sulk in its tent. It will undoubtedly sulk and nurse its grievances as we have seen elsewhere. But what action it will take if it is marginalized in Korea and beyond in Asia remains to be seen.

105. Jane Perlez, "Canceling Of Trump-Kim Meeting Shakes Asia But Could Help China," <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/asia/trump-xi-jinping-north-korea.html>, May 24, 2018

106. Elizabeth Wishnick, "Russian-North Korean Relations: A New Era?," Samuel S. Kim and Tai Hwan Lee Eds., *North Korea and Northeast Asia*, Lanham, MD. : Rowman and Littlefield Publishers. 2002, P. 145; and Yoshinnori Takeda, "Putin's Foreign Policy Toward North Korea," *International Journal of the Asia-Pacific*, VI, No. 2, 2006, p. 202

107. Artyom Lukin, "From the 'Diplotainment' Of Summits To Six-Party Talks."

The alliance with China appears to be the only offer on the table now for Moscow has almost completely burned its bridges with Washington. But that relationship hardly offers Moscow an opportunity to recoup its losses in the Korean peace process. Instead, it offers it the prospect of further subordination to Beijing. Russian observers can claim that they know the stakes and will not fall victim to such a policy of subordination to China. But as long as the ruling elite believes its privileges and power to be at stake due to attacks from the West and sees in China an ideologically like-minded guarantor of its tenure in power (not least through judicious bribes), it will probably continue to "lean to one side." Yet China clearly also fears being marginalized to some degree by the process now underway and knows well that North Korea resents its tutelage. Finally, this configuration presents Washington with an enormous strategic opportunity. It can use its power to convene a multilateral program of economic revival for North Korea that minimizes China's long-term influence over the DPRK and helps it become more independent of China while also being less of a threat to its neighbors and the world. Russia too, with sufficient backing, could play a secondary role in this design. But first it would have to settle its differences with Washington and move away from Beijing.

While the U.S. government has already grasped the nettle of offering economic assistance, it is not yet definitively clear what form such a package might take. Trump's statements against a government program of aid and assistance, should not, therefore, be taken as definitive.¹⁰⁸ But Washington's combined economic, political, and military leverage could, if wisely deployed, reshape the structure of Northeast Asia in a more beneficial way for all combined and enhance U.S. and other parties' interests at the same time. One can only wonder whether the U.S. will have the vision, skill, and forbearance to seize that opportunity and with it redraw the security map of Northeast Asia in a way that not only enhances peace and security but also advances

108. Perlez, "A Trump-Kim Deal Could Send China's Trade With North Korea Soaring."

Washington's as well as even both Korea's interests.¹⁰⁹

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109. Stephen Blank, "A Way Out of the North Korean Labyrinth," <http://www.keia.org/publication/way-out-north-korean-labyrinth>, March 22, 2018

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