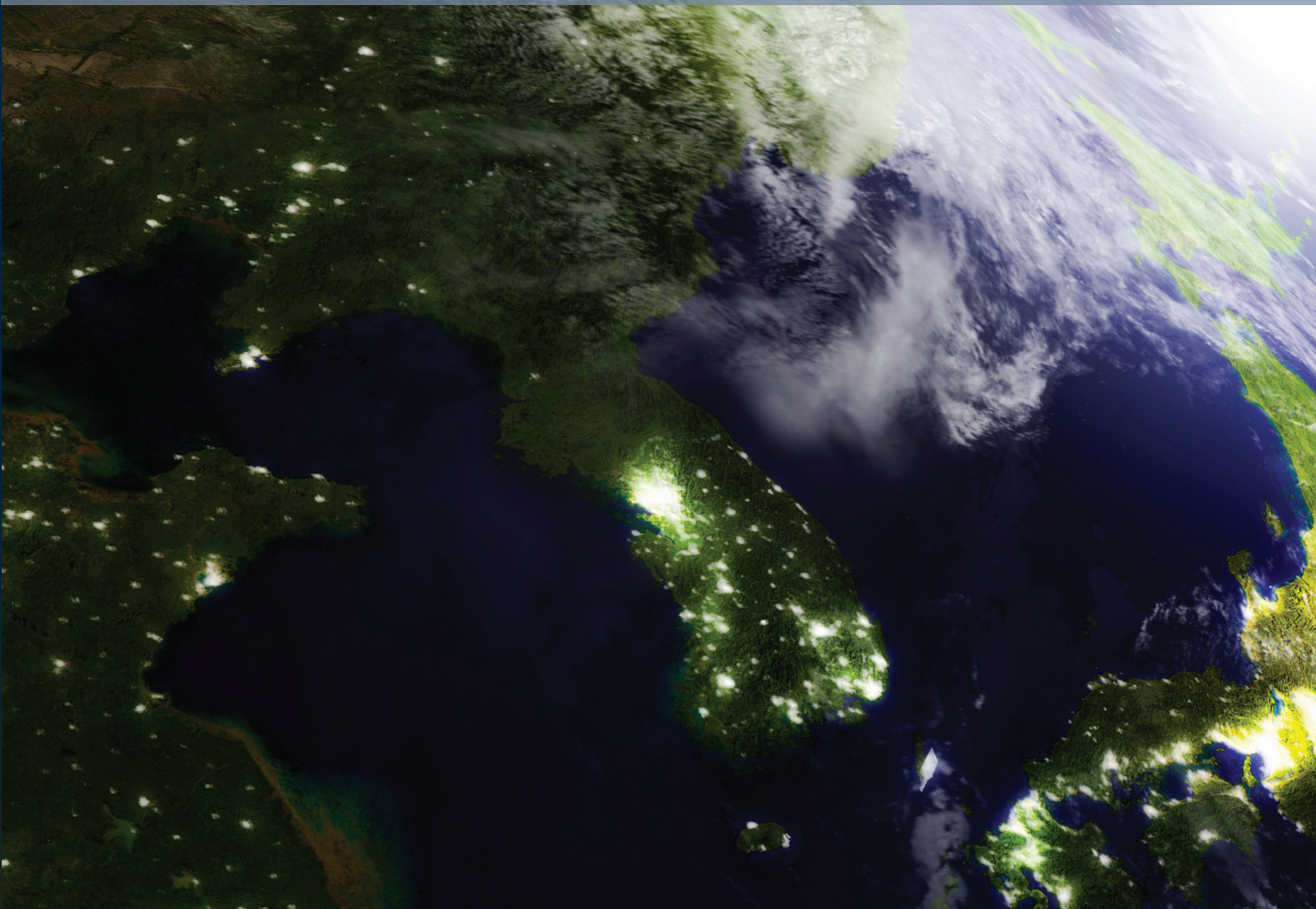


THE CHINA-RUSSIA ENTENTE AND THE KOREAN PENINSULA

By Jaewoo Choo, Youngjun Kim, Artyom Lukin, and Elizabeth Wishnick



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THE CHINA-RUSSIA ENTENTE AND THE KOREAN PENINSULA

*Jaewoo Choo, Youngjun Kim, Artyom Lukin, and
Elizabeth Wishnick*

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For further information about NBR, contact:

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THE CHINA-RUSSIA ENTENTE AND THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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— FOREWORD —

By the end of 2017, tensions on the Korean Peninsula had reached an unprecedented level of instability as a direct result of North Korea's advancements in its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, especially the record number of ballistic missile tests in 2017. Yet despite the rapid improvement in relations between the United States and North Korea since then, a nuclear deal still seems a distant possibility as the two sides have failed to come to terms with each other's vastly differing definitions of denuclearization. Less often mentioned, however, is the impact of two powers sitting behind the curtains, namely China and Russia.

This NBR *Special Report* seeks to assess the role of these two powers, separately and in coordination, in the interplay of strategic political, security, and economic issues on the Korean Peninsula. Driven by common dissatisfaction with real or perceived Western constraints on their geopolitical ambitions, China and Russia have steadily converged in their positions on key regional strategic issues. Though the two maintain independent interests on the margins, their core aims on the Korean Peninsula appear congruent and largely complicate the United States' pursuit of its goals. In fact, Russia's support for, and the growing popularity of, China's dual-track approach to the North Korean nuclear dilemma—the establishment of a peace mechanism (and likely the withdrawal of U.S. troops) with the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula—presents deep challenges to the United States in part through what appears to be an underlying aim of dismantling the U.S. alliance with the Republic of Korea (ROK) and in turn neutralizing U.S. influence on the peninsula.

Indeed as one author in this report expresses, alignment between China and Russia over North Korea may foreshadow a longer, more contracted process of coordination between the two partners in opposition to U.S. interests in the region. This dovetails closely with the findings of the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) project entitled “The Strategic Implications of China-Russia Relations,” which identified a clear trend in China's and Russia's coordinated pursuit of geostrategic goals largely at odds with U.S. interests on the international stage.¹

Thanks to the generous support of the Korea Foundation, NBR has invited four leading experts to assess the impact of China-Russia relations on several intractable issues confronting the Korean Peninsula—in particular, North Korean nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development—as well as to provide regional perspectives on the implications for major stakeholders, including the United States. The essays benefited from discussions at a workshop that NBR organized on the same topic in May 2018 in Seoul, which convened policymakers and scholars from the ROK, the United States, China, Russia, and Japan.

In the first essay, Elizabeth Wishnick makes the case that China and Russia have aligned over the denuclearization of North Korea because of parallel, albeit not identical, interests on the Korean Peninsula. A noticeable difference lies, for example, in the extent to which each country is willing to pressure South Korea over opposition to Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). The congruent but not identical nature of these interests allows each country greater flexibility within the partnership. While both China and Russia support the same means of denuclearization,

¹ For the findings of this project, see Richard J. Ellings and Robert Sutter, eds., *Axis of Authoritarians: Implications of China-Russia Cooperation* (Seattle: NBR, 2018); and Robert Sutter, “China-Russia Relations: Strategic Implications and U.S. Policy Options,” NBR, NBR Special Report, no. 73, September 2018.

such as a “double freeze,” Wishnick argues that they have different motivations. China has clear security-driven interests, while Russia seeks economic opportunities and great-power prestige. The flexibility of the Sino-Russian relationship presents a distinct obstacle to U.S. policy in the region.

Youngjun Kim focuses on North Korean strategy and cites the country’s *juche* (self-reliance) ideology to make the argument that North Korea will not completely pivot toward any one power, whether China, Russia, or the United States, and instead will likely try to balance between the three. Seeking to reduce its reliance on China, North Korea has looked to Russia as an alternative source of economic and military support. At the same time, a series of de-escalation efforts have allowed it to gradually begin engaging with the United States and South Korea. A balanced power strategy, Kim argues, could lead North Korea down a path similar to the one Vietnam followed to economic prosperity. Moreover, North Korea’s shift from being an adversary to a friend of the United States would increase the United States’ position and influence on the peninsula.

Harking back to the 1950s, when China, Russia, and North Korea were allied as Communist states against the United States, Artyom Lukin suggests that the three powers have again become aligned in recent times to take on U.S. dominance and influence. This time, however, hard geopolitical interests, rather than ideology, have been the driving factors. Lukin contends that Russia is willing to not oppose Chinese expansionism in the Asian theater and to let China lead on the Korean Peninsula in exchange for Chinese support of Russian interests in Europe and the Middle East. This alignment will challenge the United States’ interests in multiple regions, effectively diverting U.S. resources from a single front. An overstretched United States may decide to seek a partner in Russia to balance competing Chinese ambitions in Asia. Such a partnership, however, would require the United States to make major concessions to Russia.

The final essay by Jaewoo Choo examines the changing regional dynamics on the Korean Peninsula and attributes growing Sino-Russian alignment to a geopolitical opportunity to push back against long-standing U.S. dominance. Although the United States has maintained strong influence—militarily and politically—in South Korea, the pressure to denuclearize North Korea has provided an opening for China and Russia to expand their combined sphere of influence. Sino-Russian cooperation has given birth to a dual-track approach in which the denuclearization of North Korea is directly dependent on the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea, thereby compromising the U.S.-ROK alliance. Choo posits that elements of U.S. isolationism under the Trump administration have allowed China and Russia to play a larger role in setting the terms and conditions of a peace agreement between the two Koreas and contributed to reducing U.S. influence on the peninsula.

I would like to thank the Korea Foundation for making possible both this report and the workshop in Seoul. The workshop proceedings would also not have been possible without critical support from the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Finally, I am deeply grateful to my NBR colleagues Brian O’Keefe, for his relentless support of this project, and Aimée Tat and Edward Collins-Chase, for their assistance in preparing the report for publication.

Brian Franchell
Senior Project Manager, Political and Security Affairs
The National Bureau of Asian Research

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The Impact of the Sino-Russian Partnership on the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

Elizabeth Wishnick

ELIZABETH WISHNICK is Professor of Political Science at Montclair State University in New Jersey. She can be reached at <wishnicke@montclair.edu>.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the impact of the Sino-Russian partnership on the North Korean nuclear crisis and assesses the U.S. policy implications.

MAIN ARGUMENT

China and Russia have parallel, but not identical, interests in the North Korean nuclear crisis, reflecting the different roles they play in East Asia. This shows the flexibility of the Sino-Russian partnership, rather than its limitations, and presents new challenges for U.S. policy. While they both supported a “double freeze” proposal and were opposed to the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), China aspires to be a powerbroker in the conflict and appreciates North Korea’s utility as a buffer against the alliance between the U.S. and the Republic of Korea (ROK), while Russia views the nuclear crisis as an opportunity to demonstrate its relevance as a great power in Asia and move forward with its regional economic initiatives.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Shared norms and principles have brought China and Russia together on North Korea policy. The nuclear crisis has further strengthened the Sino-Russian partnership, despite differences between the two countries, which limits U.S. policy options and complicates relations between the U.S. and the ROK.
- Although Russia tends to be viewed as the “spoiler,” its endgame for the Korean Peninsula, involving multilateral cooperation with South Korea, requires a settlement of the nuclear crisis so that sanctions will be lifted. The conflictual U.S.-Russia relationship, however, reduces Russian incentives for cooperation, even though Russian policy toward the North Korean crisis is generally in greater alignment with U.S. objectives than is China’s policy.
- China is often seen as the key to conflict resolution, but it will be willing to tolerate a low level of tension on the Korean Peninsula, as long as the risk of war is low, to distract the U.S. from its efforts to constrain China. The trade war makes China even less receptive to U.S. overtures for cooperation.
- Friction in U.S.-ROK relations enables China to drive a wedge between the two countries—for example, by extracting a pledge from South Korea to limit the deployment of THAAD in exchange for a removal of Chinese sanctions.

The U.S. National Security Strategy, released in December 2017, sees a joint challenge by China and Russia to U.S. interests, influence, and security.¹ However, unlike in the 1950s when the United States faced a Sino-Soviet alliance with important consequences for the Korean Peninsula, today a less predictable Sino-Russian partnership exerts influence over Korean affairs. China and Russia share common positions and act in parallel, but they are not in lockstep in their response to the Korean nuclear crisis. Despite the two countries' broad overall agreement, the differences in their approaches and interests on specific policies only serve to enhance the challenges facing the United States in relations with China and Russia alone and together.

This essay examines how the Sino-Russian partnership plays out in the North Korean nuclear crisis and what this means for the United States and the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK). By assessing the degree to which China and Russia share a unity of purpose in their responses to this security crisis on their borders, we can better understand the scope and dynamics of their partnership and address the nature of the challenge it poses for the United States and its allies. The Sino-Russian partnership is not an alliance, and while the two countries coordinate, their policies are not identical. This does not mean, however, that the partnership is a limited needs-based one;² rather, this essay concludes that the partnership is a flexible one, involving shared norms but divergent policies on some issues, and is thus all the more complex to counter.

The essay begins by examining the parallel approaches that China and Russia employ to address the North Korean nuclear crisis, including their joint roadmap, their position on the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), their perspectives on sanctions, and the role of joint military exercises. The next section addresses the areas of divergence in Russian and Chinese policies toward the North Korean nuclear crisis, which reflect the different roles they play in East Asia. The final section draws policy implications for the United States and its alliance with the ROK.

Parallel Approaches to the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

The North Korean nuclear crisis has prompted unprecedented collaboration between Russia and China in their formulation of a joint policy proposal as well as in joint statements on their position on THAAD and unilateral sanctions. Russia and China also have participated in several military exercises that are related to the crisis.

The Sino-Russian Roadmap

On March 8, 2017, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi outlined a “suspension for suspension” plan that became known as the “double-freeze proposal.” According to this plan, North Korea would suspend its nuclear and missile tests if the United States and South Korea would suspend their military exercises.³ After Moon Jae-in took office in May 2017, Russia sought to capitalize on his interest in improving North-South relations by proposing new diplomatic

¹ White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., December 2017), 2, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

² Anthony V. Rinna, “Russia’s Strategic Partnerships with China and South Korea: The Impact of THAAD,” *Asia Policy* 13, no. 3 (2018): 86.

³ “Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Press Release, March 8, 2017, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1444204.shtml.

efforts toward denuclearization. Russian diplomats have long promoted a comprehensive plan that pursues parallel avenues for a settlement of outstanding issues, including rejecting both the use of force and the imposition of unilateral sanctions, considering the interests of all parties, addressing the U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia and the North Korean weapons programs, and creating a new security architecture in Northeast Asia.⁴

Russia's plan for "parallel advancement" dovetailed with China's double-freeze proposal, and the two ideas formed the basis for a joint initiative on the Korean Peninsula. In their joint statement on July 4, 2017, China and Russia announced their agreement on a North Korean moratorium on the testing of nuclear and ballistic weapons in exchange for a suspension of U.S.-ROK exercises with the aim of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula, complying with UN resolutions, resuming security dialogue, and creating a regional security architecture.⁵ The initiative was significant in that it marked the first joint position that the two countries had taken on an international issue.⁶

China's double-freeze proposal has garnered the most attention. Minxin Pei has argued, for example, that a double freeze would reward North Korea for violating UN resolutions on nuclear programs and that compliance involves asymmetric costs. North Korea could easily restart its nuclear program and would only be subject to verification for observable activities. The United States, on the other hand, would have to sacrifice its military exercises with South Korea, which are easily observable (unlike North Korean nuclear and missile programs), and could face a major threat if these programs were secretly continued, as they appear to be at the time of writing.⁷

For Russia, the North Korean crisis, much like the civil war in Syria, provides an opportunity to demonstrate its continued global relevance and status as a great power. President Vladimir Putin has been using the crisis to promote Russia as a valuable dialogue partner, urging the resumption of the six-party talks, offering Russia's services as a mediator, and urging direct talks between the United States and North Korea. Russian scholars further note that a proactive policy on Korean Peninsula affairs serves their country's long-standing goal to play a role in creating a new security architecture for Northeast Asia.⁸

Opposition to THAAD

China and Russia are both opposed to the deployment of THAAD, which they see as counterproductive to regional stability and harmful to their own security interests. Chinese officials reacted particularly strongly to the deployment of the system in April 2017, going so far as to take economic countermeasures against South Korea, one of China's top economic partners, due to the potential impact on China's second-strike capability.⁹ Chinese officials fear that THAAD could be configured in such a way as to cover missile launches from deep

⁴ Artyom Lukin et al., "Nuclear Weapons and Russian-North Korean Relations," Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2017, 16, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/NuclearWeaponsRussiaDPRKDec2017.pdf>.

⁵ "Joint Statement by the Russian and Chinese Foreign Ministries on the Korean Peninsula's Problems," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia), July 4, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2807662.

⁶ Dmitry Streltsov, Anna Kireeva, and Ilya Dyachkov, "Russia's View on the International Security in Northeast Asia," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 30, no. 1 (2018): 127, http://www.academia.edu/36421582/Russias_View_on_the_International_Security_in_Northeast_Asia.

⁷ Minxin Pei, "China's 'Double-Freeze' Con," *Project Syndicate*, August 13, 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/north-korea-nuclear-threat-china-double-freeze-by-minxin-pei-2017-08>.

⁸ Streltsov et al., "Russia's View on the International Security in Northeast Asia," 126.

⁹ J.J. Suh, "Missile Defense and the Security Dilemma: THAAD, Japan's 'Proactive Peace,' and the Arms Race in Northeast Asia," *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 15, no. 9 (2017): 4–5.

inside China.¹⁰ Although THAAD would not imperil Russia's deterrent, which is located outside the system's range, Russian officials, like their Chinese counterparts, oppose measures that strengthen the U.S. military presence near Russia's borders and could alter the regional military balance. The two countries have previously issued a number of joint statements opposing the U.S. deployment of missile defense systems globally. At the October 2016 Xiangshan Forum in Singapore, China's alternative to the Shangri-La Dialogue on defense issues, Chinese and Russian officials protested U.S. missile defense deployments in neighboring states, which they criticized as unilateral steps that undermined regional security.¹¹

Despite their opposition to THAAD, neither Russia nor China wants to see a nuclear North Korea lead to a wider nuclear arms race or conflict in the region. Nonetheless, after the meeting between Putin and Xi in July 2017, the two leaders stated that tensions on the Korean Peninsula should not be used as a pretext for the United States to increase its military capabilities in the region and reiterated their opposition to THAAD. They claimed that the system is not only detrimental to their own security interests but ineffective for achieving North Korea's denuclearization or ensuring peace and stability in Northeast Asia.¹²

Military Exercises

While China and Russia called for a freeze of U.S.-ROK military exercises in exchange for a moratorium on North Korean weapons testing, the nuclear crisis also has provided a rationale for the two partners to conduct military exercises to display their own cooperation against regional threats. They held two sets of computer-simulated exercises, interspersed with their joint condemnations of U.S.-ROK cooperation on missile defense, to prepare for responding to ballistic missile attacks and practice missile defense. Air and Space Security 2016 was held in May 2016 at the Russian Defense Ministry's Aerospace Defense Force in Moscow.¹³ A second set of exercises was held in Beijing in December 2017 to simulate joint missile defense operations.¹⁴

China and Russia also have conducted three sets of naval exercises in waters near the Korean Peninsula—first in 2005 as a part of the initial joint Sino-Russian Peace Mission series and then as a part of joint naval exercises in 2012 and 2017. Although no joint naval exercises were held in 2018, China participated for the first time in a major land-based Russian exercise, Vostok (East). The missions involved in the naval exercises, however, were not clearly linked to Korean Peninsula security threats. The 2005 exercises focused on a Taiwan scenario, while the sets of exercises in 2012 and 2017 focused on emergency rescue missions.

Views on Sanctions

Russia and China have long claimed to oppose sanctions as a tool of foreign policy. In their 2016 Joint Statement on International Law, they decried the imposition of sanctions by individual

¹⁰ Suh, "Missile Defense and the Security Dilemma," 4.

¹¹ Minnie Chan, "China and Russia Close Ranks against U.S. Missile-Defence System," *South China Morning Post*, October 12, 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2027171/china-and-russia-close-ranks-against-us-missile-defence>.

¹² "Joint Statement by the Russian and Chinese Foreign Ministries on the Korean Peninsula's Problems."

¹³ Franz-Stefan Gady, "China and Russia to Hold First Computer-Enabled Missile Defense Exercise in May," *Diplomat*, May 2, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/china-and-russia-to-hold-first-computer-enabled-missile-defense-exercise-in-may>.

¹⁴ Huang Panyue, "Defense Ministry: China, Russia Kick Off Ballistic Missile Drill as Scheduled," China Military Online, December 12, 2017, http://english.pladaily.com.cn/view/2017-12/12/content_7864935.htm.

states, which they termed the use of “unilateral coercive measures.”¹⁵ China, nonetheless, imposed a type of sanction against South Korea in retaliation for the deployment of THAAD, sharply restricting tourism and curtailing the investments of the Lotte Group in China. Although South Korea moved forward with the initial deployment of the defense system, President Moon agreed to China’s “three no’s” in exchange for lifting the economic sanctions:

1. No additional THAAD deployments in South Korea
2. No participation in a U.S.-led strategic missile defense system
3. No creation of a U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral military alliance¹⁶

Although China and Russia have voted for sanctions against North Korea at the United Nations and largely complied with them, they have used their veto threat to dilute some of the sanctions, and both countries have been accused of lapses in compliance. As a state bordering North Korea, Russia has criticized its nuclear testing but has sought to shape UN sanctions in such a way as to avoid the economic collapse of the state and limit economic damage to the Russian Far East. While Russia has cut off ties between Gazprom and North Korea, as well as between Russian and North Korean financial institutions, and agreed to phase out the contracts of North Korean laborers (who play a key role in the construction sector in the Russian Far East), Russian officials succeeded in exempting sales of fuel for North Korean civilian aircraft and exports of coal and iron ore from Siberia and Mongolia destined for China via the port of Rajin.¹⁷ Moreover, the United States has accused Russian companies of taking advantage of a loophole in the sanctions to transfer oil to North Korean tankers on the high seas, thereby violating the cap on fuel deliveries. While China reportedly provides 500,000 metric tons of crude oil and 270,000 metric tons of oil products annually to North Korea, Russia’s energy exports to the country are also significant—200,000–300,000 metric tons of gasoline and diesel fuel, valued at as much as \$300 million.¹⁸ Russia has denied the U.S. allegations and worked to prevent the publication of a UN report detailing how Russian (and Chinese) front companies have violated the sanctions.¹⁹ In fact, the report highlighted that Chinese companies were instrumental in facilitating black market trade as well as illicit financial transactions.²⁰

China accounts for 90% of North Korea’s foreign trade and has enforced sanctions more strictly than Russia at particular times to voice its displeasure at North Korean actions that jeopardize Chinese interests and to remind Kim Jong-un of his country’s economic dependence on China.²¹ For example, China, which is North Korea’s primary supplier of crude oil, agreed to enforce quarterly caps. While not taking into account smuggling or falsification of data, trade figures show

¹⁵ “The Declaration of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the Promotion of International Law,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia), June 25, 2016, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/position_word_order/-/asset_publisher/6S4RuXfeYlKr/content/id/2331698.

¹⁶ Andray Abrahamian and Daekwon Son, “Moving On: China Resolves THAAD Dispute with South Korea,” 38 North, November 9, 2017, <https://www.38north.org/2017/11/abrahamianson110917>.

¹⁷ Pyung Kyun Woo, “Russia’s Policy on North Korean Nuclear Issue: Before and After, Imposing Sanctions against North Korea,” *Korean Journal of Security Affairs* 23, no. 1 (2018): 69–70. The sanctions have nonetheless prevented South Korean investment in the Khasan-Rajin project, which Russia has long sought.

¹⁸ Lukin et al., “Nuclear Weapons and Russian–North Korean Relations.”

¹⁹ “Note by the President of the Security Council,” UN Security Council, February 2017, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/150; and Colum Lynch, “UN Report Details How North Korea Evades Sanctions,” *Foreign Policy*, September 20, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/20/un-report-details-how-north-korea-evades-sanctions>.

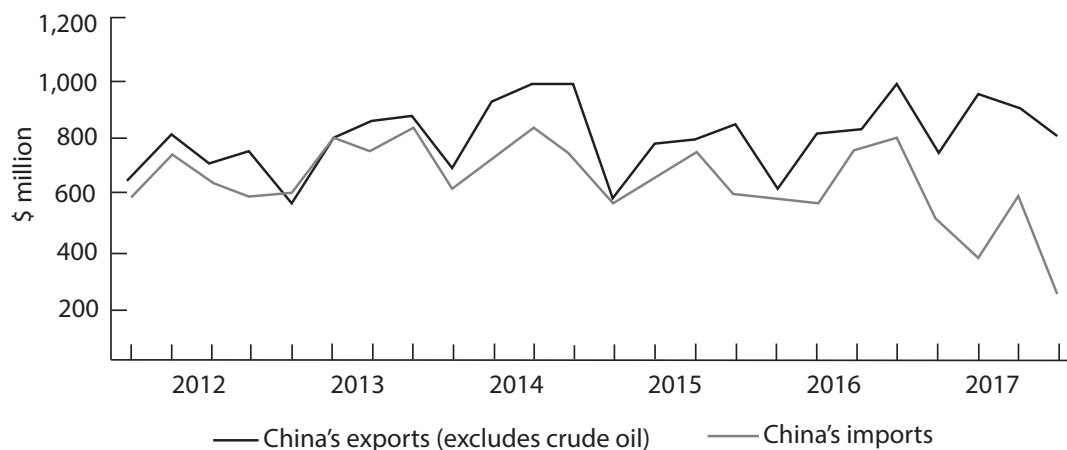
²⁰ Eleanor Albert, “What to Know about the Sanctions on North Korea,” Council on Foreign Relations, January 3, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-know-about-sanctions-north-korea>.

²¹ Samuel Ramani, “China’s Approach to North Korea Sanctions,” *Diplomat*, January 10, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/chinas-approach-to-north-korea-sanctions>.

a significant drop in Chinese imports from North Korea at the end of 2017 as well as a decline in exports (see **Figure 1**).²²

In the context of ongoing negotiations between the two Koreas and between the United States and North Korea, Russia and China have backed North Korea's demand for sanctions relief. On October 10, 2018, the three countries signed a joint communiqué urging countries to rethink sanctions in view of steps already undertaken by North Korea and emphasizing their shared opposition to unilateral sanctions.²³ This puts Russia and China at odds with the other UN Security Council members, who seek to maintain the pressure on North Korea until complete denuclearization is achieved. While Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has been skeptical about North Korea's commitment to denuclearization, China and Russia have urged the United States to take steps to increase trust rather than to reinforce sanctions.²⁴

FIGURE 1 China–North Korea trade, 2012–17



SOURCE: William B. Brown, “Beijing’s Economic War on Pyongyang,” Korea Economic Institute of America, Peninsula, January 29, 2018, <http://blog.keaia.org/2018/01/beijings-economic-war-pyongyang>.

China, Russia, and East Asia

China and Russia play different roles in the Asia-Pacific, which their policies toward North Korea reflect. For China, which sees itself as a great power in East Asia, the outcome of the North Korean nuclear crisis is significant for Sino-U.S. competition in the region. As Chinese scholar Ren

²² William B. Brown, “Beijing’s Economic War on Pyongyang,” Korea Economic Institute of America, Peninsula, January 29, 2018, <http://blog.keaia.org/2018/01/beijings-economic-war-pyongyang>.

²³ “Sovmestnoye informatsionnoye kommyunike o trekhstoronnikh konsul’tatsiyakh zamestiteley ministrov inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii, Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respubliki i Koreyskoy Narodno-Demokraticeskoy Respubliki” [Joint Informational Communiqué about the Three-Party Consultations by the Deputy Foreign Ministers of the Russian Federation, the People’s Republic of China and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia), October 10, 2018, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3370331?c=1542074246062.

²⁴ Leo Byrne, “UNSC Meeting Reveals Divisions on North Korea Sanctions,” NK News, September 27, 2018, <http://www.nknews.org/2018/09/unsc-meeting-reveals-divisions-on-north-korea-sanctions>.

Xiao observes, the fundamental question for the Chinese government is whether North Korea is a buffer against the U.S.-ROK alliance or a time bomb on China's borders.²⁵ While China aspires to be a key powerbroker, Chinese officials reject the "responsibility" thesis, according to which China's economic relationship with North Korea is viewed both as an enabler of its misbehavior and as a form of leverage for compelling cooperation. On the other hand, as the Trump administration broke from precedent to engage Kim directly in the absence of progress on denuclearization, Chinese officials feared losing influence.²⁶ This led to a flurry of meetings with Kim and perhaps an implicit promise from China to relax its implementation of sanctions in exchange for a decrease in provocative actions by North Korea. Certainly, the North Korean leader appears to have made an about-face in his attitude toward Xi Jinping. At a recent public ceremony, Kim bestowed honors on Xi usually designed for North Korean leaders, which is an unprecedented gesture.²⁷

The bottom line for China has always been border security and regional stability, as it shares a lengthy border—some 840 miles—with North Korea. As Vice President Wang Qishan told the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on May 8, 2018, avoiding war and maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula are important to safeguard China's core interests.²⁸ Reports of the possible contamination or collapse of North Korea's nuclear testing site led to alarm in China's neighboring provinces, and the war rhetoric from North Korea and the United States in 2017 raised fears of massive refugee flows in the event of a conflict or collapse of the North Korean state. The Chinese government has involved a wide range of domestic actors in contingency planning, covering everything from the construction of refugee centers to taking control over North Korean WMD installations. It has even engaged in limited discussions with U.S. officials about how to deal with a possible collapse of the North Korean government.²⁹

Writing at a time of high tension between North Korea and the international community, Zhu Feng, a leading Chinese academic, observed in *Foreign Affairs* that China faced three options with respect to its North Korea policy: (1) working more closely with the United States to impose sanctions, (2) reluctantly and partially enforcing sanctions, or (3) reinforcing its partnership with Russia and using North Korea as leverage in relations with the United States and South Korea.³⁰ It seemed that China was moving from reluctant enforcement toward greater cooperation with the United States on sanctions by the end of 2017. However, with the onset of the trade war in 2018, the Chinese government seems more inclined to tolerate a low level of tension between North Korea and the United States, especially if this diverts U.S. attention and resources that might otherwise be focused on Chinese activities elsewhere in East Asia, such as the South China Sea.

Russia claims that its priority is denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, though President Putin famously quipped that North Koreans "would rather eat grass" than give

²⁵ Ren Xiao, "Toward a Normal State-to-State Relationship? China and the DPRK in Changing Northeast Asia," *North Korean Review* 11, no. 2 (2015): 69.

²⁶ Yun Sun, "The U.S.-DPRK Summit: Assessing Chinese Anxieties," 38 North, March 27, 2018, <https://www.38north.org/2018/03/ysun032718/>.

²⁷ Colin Zwirko, "North Korea Pays Tribute to Chinese President in Special Mass Games Finale," NK News, November 5, 2018, <http://www.nknews.org/2018/11/north-korea-pays-tribute-to-chinese-president-in-special-mass-games-finale>.

²⁸ "U.S.-North Korea Summit Needed, Chinese VP Wang Says," Reuters, May 25, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-economy-forum-wang-idUSKCN1IQ214>.

²⁹ "China's Evolving North Korea Strategy," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 2018, 422–31, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Annual_Report/Chapters/Chapter%203%20Section%205-%20China%27s%20Evolving%20North%20Korea%20Strategy_0.pdf.

³⁰ Zhu Feng, "China's North Korean Liability: How Washington Can Get Beijing to Rein In Pyongyang," *Foreign Affairs*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-07-11/chinas-north-korean-liability>.

up their nuclear weapons.³¹ While being skeptical about the success of sanctions, Russia has supported them in principle as a way of reducing the likelihood of nuclear accidents affecting its territory and discouraging a U.S. military buildup or attack near its borders.³² Unlike in the case of China, for Russia a regional settlement is essential for its economic agenda in the Russian Far East, which involves plans for trilateral economic and energy cooperation with North and South Korea. Although a project to create a rail hub in the North Korean port of Rajin was completed in 2014, tensions on the peninsula shelved plans to develop it into a major hub for cargo traveling from Asia to Europe via the Trans-Siberian Railway.³³ Russia has long been interested in constructing a trilateral gas “peace” pipeline connecting North and South Korea (see **Figure 2**), but this would

FIGURE 2 Russia’s proposed trilateral gas “peace” pipeline



SOURCE: Keun-Wook Paik, “South Korea’s Energy Policy Change and the Implications for Its LNG Imports,” Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, June 2018, 21.

³¹ Scott Neuman, “Putin: North Korea Would ‘Eat Grass’ before Giving Up Nukes,” National Public Radio, September 5, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/09/05/548676414/putin-north-korea-would-eat-grass-before-giving-up-nukes>.

³² Alexander Gabuev, “A Russian Perspective on the Impact of Sanctions,” Carnegie Moscow Center, August 3, 2017, <https://carnegie.ru/2017/08/03/russian-perspective-on-impact-of-sanctions-pub-72723>.

³³ Artyom Lukin and Liudmila Zakharova, “Russia–North Korea Economic Ties: Is There More Than Meets the Eye?” Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 6, 2017, 3, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/10/russia-north-korea-economic-ties-meets-eye>.

require South Korean investment that is not possible at present due to sanctions against both North Korea and Russia.³⁴

Although China might be involved in the gas pipeline project and has its own agenda for regional development with North Korea, the development of the Russian Far East is particularly important for Russia's role in East Asia. At a time when tensions between China and North Korea were increasing, Putin was improving relations with Kim. North Korea's support for Russia in the United Nations after the invasion of Crimea led Moscow to reassess Pyongyang's value as a partner. At the same time that China was encouraged by the international community to use its economic leverage against North Korea, Russia was working to improve its political relations with the Kim regime. Russian scholars spoke of Russia playing the role of "honest broker" in the North Korean nuclear crisis. Indeed, the country has sought balanced ties between North and South Korea, and its engagement with South Korea has coincided with President Moon's New Northern Policy. South Korea is notably the only U.S. ally that did not impose sanctions on Russia in 2014.

Russia's Korean diplomacy is a part of the country's overall effort to enhance its profile in East Asia. Although the international community views China as the key interlocutor in the North Korean crisis, Russia has encouraged the use of multilateral frameworks such as the lapsed six-party talks as a means of making its own contributions more relevant and facilitating the development of a new regional security architecture in which it would play a key role. While Chinese officials have paid lip service to this idea, they typically highlight the role of China and the United States in resolving Korean Peninsula issues. U.S. commentary, for its part, has tended to portray Russia as a disruptive force (for example, by violating sanctions) rather than a constructive one. Other countries also discount Russia's potential role, and in July 2017 it was not invited to Track 1.5 talks in Sweden that included all the other former members of the six-party talks to discuss the potential for restarting the forum.³⁵

Kim exploits these differences among North Korea's partners by meeting individually with key players. Despite many invitations, however, he has yet to visit Russia. While there was some speculation that he would visit the country in 2018, this visit did not take place. His diplomacy, especially vis-à-vis the United States, may have been focused on encouraging China and Russia to make concessions on sanctions to avoid being left out of a final settlement.

Conclusion: Broader Consequences for the U.S.-ROK Alliance

Both China and Russia have an interest in less than full cooperation by North Korea for different reasons. The differences that do exist between China and Russia are more important for the endgame than the process. The major difference involves the extent to which each country is willing to link opposition to THAAD to relations with South Korea, with China choosing to link the two and Russia opting against doing so for economic reasons. China's position on this issue has proved to be the more challenging for the alliance, as the South Korean government decided to set limits on the deployment of THAAD in exchange for a lifting of Chinese sanctions.

³⁴ Keun-Wook Paik, "South Korea's Energy Policy Change and the Implications for Its LNG Imports," Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, June 2018, 20, <https://doi.org/10.26889/9781784671136>.

³⁵ Anthony Rinna, "Lumps of Coal: How China's Demand for Russia's Natural Resources Affects North Korea Sanctions Enforcement," Sino-NK, August 13, 2017, <https://sinonk.com/2017/08/13/lumps-of-coal-how-chinas-demand-for-russias-natural-resources-affects-north-korea-sanctions-enforcement>.

The differences between Russia and China reflect their differing priorities and roles in East Asia. For the most part, the two countries agree about the path to a solution, involving their joint roadmap and opposition to unilateral sanctions. Their agreement reflects the shared norms and principles that underpin the Sino-Russian partnership. This common approach aggravates problems for the U.S.-ROK alliance by explicitly linking two noncomparable things: North Korean denuclearization, which is required by the UN Security Council in response to North Korea's violations of international agreements, with the demand for a halt in U.S.-ROK military exercises.

U.S. policy has created additional challenges for resolving the North Korean crisis. The ongoing trade war makes China less receptive to U.S. overtures and more likely to accept a low level of tension in U.S.-North Korea relations to reduce perceived pressure on China. At the same time, the conflictual U.S.-Russia relationship reduces Russian incentives for cooperation, even though Russian policy toward the North Korean crisis is in greater alignment than China's with U.S. objectives. Thus, in the short term the crisis has strengthened the Sino-Russian partnership, despite the differences between Russia and China, which has limited U.S. policy options and complicated U.S.-ROK relations.

North Korea's Relations with China and Russia in the Security Realm

Youngjun Kim

YOUNGJUN KIM is a Professor of National Security Affairs at the National Security College of the Korea National Defense University. He is the author of the book *Origins of the North Korean Garrison State: The People's Army and the Korean War* (2017). Professor Kim is a member of the Advisory Board on Defense Reform for the ROK Ministry of Defense, a member of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Commander's Strategic Shaping Board, and an official reviewer of government performance for the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Department of Unification in the Prime Minister's Office. He advises the President's Office and National Security Office on North Korea and Arms Control. Professor Kim is also an International Senior Research Fellow at the U.S. Army's Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth. He can be reached at <bumanbake@hotmail.com>.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the relations of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) with both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia in the security realm and discusses policy implications for the U.S. alliance with the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Northeast Asian stability.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The DPRK has rapidly changed its strategic course since the beginning of 2018, and many parts of its strategic goals remain unexplored. While North Korea's trade and economy have heavily depended on China, its military and security strategy has sought independence from China and has recently focused on Russia. It is not new for North Korea's leadership to seek independence from China in the security realm. The country's *juche* (self-reliance) ideology dates back to the leadership of Kim Il-sung, the founder of North Korea. Following the end of the Cold War in 1991, as Russia ended its support to North Korea and opened relations with South Korea, the DPRK's dependence on the Chinese economy increased. During his leadership, Kim Jong-il tried to reduce this heavy dependence on China, but failed. Today, Kim Jong-un is attempting to reduce North Korean dependence on China by looking to Russia as an alternative partner. Broadly, North Korea wishes to benefit by balancing its position, on the one hand, between China and Russia and, on the other hand, between China and the U.S. and its allies.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- North Korea's strategy of balancing between China and Russia should be closely monitored, though it is unlikely that North Korea would ever reach closer relations with Russia than with China.
- North Korea's balancing strategy between the U.S. and China and Russia is a key issue and presents an opportunity for the U.S. and its allies to shape a new order in Northeast Asia amid escalating U.S.-China strategic rivalry.
- North Korea views China's recent major military exercise in Manchuria and its expansion of the People's Liberation Army as more threatening than reassuring and now is starting to consider the U.S. and South Korea as potential partners for economic development to reduce Chinese influence.
- The recent warming of North-South relations, including the new military agreement and progress toward a declaration of the end of the Korean War, will be an opportunity to upgrade the U.S.-ROK alliance rather than to reduce its significance.

It would have been no surprise if *Time* magazine had selected Kim Jong-un as the 2018 “person of the year.” Since his New Year’s speech at the beginning of 2018, Kim and President Moon Jae-in have held three summits, including one in Pyongyang, while President Donald Trump has met Kim for historic summits in Singapore and Vietnam. Whereas in 2017 the world closely watched the Korean Peninsula, fearful of the possibility of a second Korean War, in 2018 the world witnessed a sudden tilt toward peace on the peninsula.

This essay examines the two main strategic goals of Kim’s foreign policy in light of North Korea’s recent changes in behavior. First, Kim wants to consolidate his rule in the long run by strengthening political support among the North Korean middle class, mainly by promoting economic development from diverse sources. Second, he seeks to make the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) more independent from China by balancing relations with China and the United States and its allies, while simultaneously balancing between China and Russia. This essay concludes by considering the policy implications of these developments for both regional stability and the U.S. alliance with the Republic of Korea (ROK). It argues that the new situation presents a great opportunity for the alliance rather than posing a challenge that might reduce its significance. This is because the future role of the U.S.-ROK alliance might be expanded and upgraded from a limited and passive role in deterring North Korean provocation to an active one in establishing lasting peace and stability in Northeast Asia, including by balancing against Chinese military expansion.

The Historical Origins of North Korea’s Policy of Balancing between China and Russia

Many security experts and international relations scholars who research and publish on North Korea’s nuclear weapons program and human rights abuse record have limited knowledge of the country’s history and culture. These experts lack familiarity with figures like Park Hon-yong, who was a political rival of Kim Il-sung during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the leader of the Workers’ Party of South Korea, and the first foreign minister of North Korea. They also have a limited understanding of the Minsangdan incident, when soldiers in many Korean guerilla forces were accused of being Japanese spies and subsequently killed by Chinese members of combined Chinese-Korean guerilla forces in camps in Manchuria. Kim Il-sung himself survived torture by Chinese forces. In analyzing North Korea’s relations with China and Russia, many experts might simply conclude that those three countries will remain inevitably united against the United States. But in the context of North Korean history and culture, the situation appears more complicated and presents an opportunity that the United States and its allies can leverage for their national interests and strategic goals.

To China, North Korea is historically a close partner. China has benefited from the existence of two Koreas because North Korea functions as a buffer zone against the United States and its allies. As such, Mao’s intervention in the Korean War when UN forces went beyond the 38th parallel was a natural result of Chinese interest. After the Korean War, North Korea remained a useful, low-cost buffer zone to China. Since the end of the Cold War, its dependence on China has increased, and trade with China now accounts for more than 90% of the DPRK’s total trade. Naturally, China wants to keep the peninsula divided as long as possible and fears unification under a U.S.-allied government because U.S. troops would be closer to its border. Moreover, millions of

Korean-Chinese residents in Manchuria could be influenced by a unified Korea, potentially heightening economic and political instability.

To North Korea, the story is not so simple. Kim Il-sung understood that North Korean freedom was limited by dependence on a bigger ally. He spent most of his young life with Chinese in Manchuria fighting against the Imperial Japanese Army, and his experience was mixed, especially following the Minsangdan incident. Kim spoke Chinese fluently, and he had close Chinese mentors, including Zhou Bozhong, a commander of the 88th Special Brigade in Russia.¹ However, he feared his political rivals, especially a Chinese-Korean faction that served under Mao Zedong's army during the Chinese Civil War and was close to Mao. Thus, Kim promoted his trusted colleagues into key positions in the Korean People's Army (KPA) before the Korean War and created a political commissar bureau (formerly the Cultural Bureau) to counterbalance and limit the influence of the Chinese-Korean faction members within the KPA, including Nam Il, later a chief negotiator in the armistice talks.² During the Korean War, Kim was not only humiliated by his enemies but also by Russia and China.

After a failed coup against him in 1956, Kim did not stop a withdrawal of Chinese forces from North Korea in the late 1950s, even when the United States introduced tactical nuclear weapons into South Korea.³ This is a prominent example of North Korea seeking to reduce its dependence on China even though Chinese support was helpful in increasing the North's military capabilities relative to those of South Korea and the United States. Following his experiences before and after the Korean War, Kim introduced the *juche* (self-reliance) ideology in the belief that North Korea had to be capable of defending itself. Here began his interests in developing nuclear weapons, despite clear Soviet and Chinese opposition to a North Korean nuclear weapons program. After the end of the Cold War, unsurprisingly, Russia chose to recognize South Korea and ended its support to North Korea. During the 1990s, because of his concern that North Korea was overly dependent on its sole partner, China, Kim Jong-il tried to develop a partnership with South Korea, Japan, and even the United States. His efforts, however, were unsuccessful, and in the late 1990s North Korea experienced a catastrophic famine and received little support from China. Following Kim Jong-un's assumption of the leadership position, North Korea continuously conducted nuclear and missile tests until early 2018. It is not surprising, however, given the historical and political context described above, that he now seeks to open a new chapter in relations with the United States and South Korea and to begin economic reform and quasi-marketization of North Korean society.

Current Cooperation in the Security Realm and North Korea's Strategic Goals

North Korea has engaged in little military cooperation with China since the withdrawal of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army from North Korea in the late 1950s or with Russia since

¹ Youngjun Kim, *Origins of the North Korean Garrison State: People's Army and the Korean War* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 47; Yi Chongsok, "Puk'an chidojiptan'gwa hangilt'ujaeng" [The North Korean Elite and Anti-Guerilla Battles], in *Haebang chonhusaui inshik* [Understanding Post-colonial Period History], ed. Kim Nam-sik et al. (Seoul: Han'gilsa, 1989), 100; and Lee Deok-il, "Yonhaejuuui soryon kuktongjokkun 88 yodanui kyolsongbaegyonggwa songgyok" [Background and Features of the Soviet 88th Special Brigade in Far Eastern Area], *Han'guk Kunhyondaesa Yongu* 6 (1997): 178.

² Kim, *Origins of the North Korean Garrison State*, 171–94.

³ Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization, 1956* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007); and James F. Person, "We Need Help from Outside: The North Korean Opposition Movement of 1956," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Cold War International History Project, Working Paper, no. 52, August 2006, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/WP52.pdf>.

the Korean War. Officially, there have been very few educational exchanges, combined exercises, or other activities between North Korea and either country's military. The only well-known area of military cooperation is within the cyberwarfare domain. Recently, the FBI and some journalists concluded that young North Korean students have studied computer science at Chinese universities with the intent of undertaking cyberattacks.⁴ Some sources also conclude that Russia provides the infrastructure for North Korea's internet and likely assists with cyberwarfare training.⁵ Nonetheless, this does not constitute formal military cooperation but rather civilian training, even though North Korean trainees conduct cyberattacks after their education.

In this context, the agreement in October 2018 between Chinese and North Korean delegations to the Xiangshan Forum that the two countries need to increase military cooperation was a significant development.⁶ Because of the historical sensitivities between China and North Korea, and especially given current talks on denuclearization between North Korea and the United States, military cooperation would likely be limited to diplomatic activities and symbolic gestures, such as visits by generals. In the case of DPRK-Russia relations, Russian generals, including the deputy head of Russia's National Defense Command Center, Viktor Kalganov, have recently visited Pyongyang, but the level of military cooperation between the two countries is still limited.⁷ Nonetheless, military cooperation with China or Russia will not be a top priority for North Korea and will continue to be more diplomatic and symbolic in style. If the KPA were to join China or Russia in military exercises, such as the 2018 Vostok exercises, denuclearization talks with the United States would likely immediately stop.

This new focus on building trust with the United States reflects a shift in the DPRK's long-term strategic goals under Kim Jong-un. Given the understanding provided by over seven decades of North Korean history and politics, it is evident that Kim has two primary strategic goals. First, he wants to maintain his regime for as long as possible by strengthening political support among the so-called North Korean middle class. To accomplish this, he needs to develop the economy and improve the quality of life of the North Korean people by ending international sanctions and attracting foreign investment. Since the end of the Cold War, North Korea's economy has depended heavily on China. Naturally, Kim seeks to change this by diversifying trade partners and opening North Korean society to developed countries while maintaining the Kim regime's grip on power. During the late 1940s and the 1950s, more than 10% of the total population of North Korea fled south to escape the Communist regime's purge. Kim Il-sung sought to fill the vacancies left behind with young people who were loyal and passionate about the regime. The support that these beneficiaries provided was instrumental in enabling the dictatorship's seven-decade rule.⁸ Now approximately two to three million North Korean people live in the

⁴ Sam Kim, "Inside North Korea's Hacker Army," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, February 8, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-02-07/inside-kim-jong-un-s-hacker-army>; and David E. Sanger, David D. Kirkpatrick, and Nicole Perlroth, "The World Once Laughed at North Korean Cyberpower. No More," *New York Times*, October 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/15/world/asia/north-korea-hacking-cyber-sony.html>.

⁵ Matthew Newton and Donghui Park, "Russia Is Now Providing North Korea with Internet: What That Could Mean for Cyber Warfare," *Forbes*, December 1, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/outofasia/2017/12/01/russia-is-now-providing-north-korea-with-internet-what-that-could-mean-for-cyber-warfare/#51a5b3ac386b>.

⁶ Elizabeth Shim, "Report: North Korea Officials Likely to Discuss Military Cooperation in China," United Press International, October 22, 2018, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2018/10/22/Report-North-Korea-officials-likely-to-discuss-military-cooperation-in-China/2251540218872.

⁷ Lee Byrne, "Russian Military Delegation Arrives in North Korea," NK News, December 14, 2017, <https://www.nknews.org/2017/12/russian-military-delegation-arrives-in-north-korea>.

⁸ Kim, *Origins of the North Korean Garrison State*, 86–114.

Pyongyang metropolitan area, and five to six million have cell phones.⁹ These members of the “middle class” are the children and families of the original beneficiaries of Kim Il-sung’s policies. Kim Jong-un seeks to reproduce his grandfather’s political strategy by consolidating support from the same socioeconomic groups to ensure his long-term political survival.

Second, Kim seeks to make North Korea more politically, economically, and psychologically independent from China. This by no means indicates that he seeks conflict with China, nor that North Korea would become an anti-Chinese regime. After all, more than 90% of North Korea’s total trade is with China. Chinese businessmen have benefited from a near monopoly in the North Korean market since the Soviet Union ceased to support the regime in 1991. Following three decades of this status quo, North Korea now seeks to reduce its economic dependence on China, fearing that economic colonialization could make the DPRK susceptible to political intervention.¹⁰ During the Obama administration’s policy of “strategic patience,” the United States, South Korea, Japan, China, and other countries strongly believed in the possibility of regime collapse in North Korea due to the pressure of international sanctions, the potential of popular uprisings or military coups, or even the potential assassination of Kim Jong-il or Kim Jong-un. Particularly, when Kim Jong-un succeeded his father as leader and subsequently purged his uncle Jang Song-thaek, many U.S. experts and former and current government officials expected the country’s imminent collapse and conducted war games aimed at preparing for this scenario.¹¹

Needless to say, North Korea did not collapse. At the same time, following large-scale exercises by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) near the border between China and North Korea, Kim recognized that the PLA would be not a savior of North Korea but a potential invader. A former colonel of the KPA who defected to the United States reported that Kim ordered a “three no’s” policy for the KPA regarding the PLA following his ascension as leader: no shared information, no combined exercises, and no talks.¹² Whether or not this testimony is true, it is not surprising that Kim viewed the expansion of PLA activities near the border as a threat. To reduce its dependence on China, North Korea has considered Russia as an alternative. It has upgraded the rank of the defense attaché at the North Korean embassy in Moscow from colonel to brigadier general and has invited high-ranking Russian military officers, including generals, to Pyongyang to strengthen its ties with Russia. However, Russia is of limited value as an alternative to China. Thus, Kim’s new initiative to thaw tensions with the United States and South Korea is not just an attempt to cheat the international community and copy the Pakistani model of a nuclear weapons state; it is motivated by the strategic goal of becoming a wealthier and stronger state and reducing dependence on China. This could present a great, low-cost opportunity for the United States and South Korea to convert North Korea into a neutral zone in the escalating Sino-U.S. rivalry.

⁹ Yonho Kim, “Cell Phones in North Korea: Has North Korea Entered the Telecommunications Revolution?” U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS and Voice of America, Report, 2014, <https://38north.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Kim-Yonho-Cell-Phones-in-North-Korea.pdf>.

¹⁰ Tae Youngho, a former high-ranking North Korean official who defected, reports that all North Korean people from the top to the bottom have a strong antipathy to China and that half of the stories about Kim Il-sung in North Korean history textbooks describe how he fought against China. See, for example, Tae Youngho, *Joongang Daily*, July 27, 2018, <https://news.joins.com/article/22840567>; and Yoo Sang-chul, *Joongang Daily*, August 7, 2018, <https://news.joins.com/article/22864400>.

¹¹ See, for example, Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (New York: Ecco, 2012); and Bruce W. Bennett, *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2013), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR331/RAND_RR331.pdf.

¹² Bruce Bennett (presentation on North Korea at a closed meeting at the Future Consensus Institute, Seoul, March 22, 2018); and Youngjun Kim, “Reverse Kissinger Strategy: North Korea and a Making a New Order of Northeast Asia” (remarks at a University of California San Diego seminar, San Diego, October 11, 2018).

Policy Implications

North Korea has not had strong military cooperation with China or Russia over the decades and will not join the strengthened Sino-Russian military partnership by participating in combined exercises like Vostok. Instead, Pyongyang has initiated a new grand strategy focused on repairing its relationships with the United States and South Korea. As underscored by the breakdown of talks in Vietnam in February, the denuclearization process will be very slow and face many obstacles, including disagreements over types of verification and confidence-building measures between the participating countries. This new strategy seeks to promote North Korea's economic development while increasing its independence from China economically, politically, and psychologically.

In this context, Kim's recent visits to China have two meanings. First, North Korea needs a backup plan in the event that negotiations with the United States fail. Second, North Korea needs to ease Chinese fears of a pivot by Pyongyang away from Beijing while it builds better relations with Washington. In keeping a plan B open, North Korea will stay close to China, but not too close.

It is clear that the great-power competition between China and the United States will increase in the future. The China-Russia partnership will be strengthened not primarily out of friendship but in response to shifts in the international system. The PLA's participation in the Vostok exercise last September sent a warning signal to the United States. In this context, North Korea's new approach toward the United States and South Korea presents both opportunities and risks. While it is difficult to imagine North Korea joining Sino-Russian combined military exercises in the near future, it is also hard to imagine the threats posed by North Korea's WMD program and human rights abuses ending anytime soon. Addressing these problems will take time, patience, and confidence building. The main purpose of the U.S.-ROK alliance has been to deter North Korean provocation and maintain peace on the Korean Peninsula. The alliance needs to be upgraded for a new era and could become central to multilateral efforts to maintain stability across East Asia under UN resolutions and international norms. A peace treaty or a declaration to end the Korean War need not lead to an end of the UN Command, a withdrawal of U.S. Forces Korea, or an end to the U.S.-ROK alliance. U.S. forces could stay on the Korean Peninsula even after the unification of Korea or a peace treaty. The future role of the U.S.-ROK alliance and UN Command could be expanded from deterring North Korean provocation to a much larger role focused on peacekeeping in East Asia. Because any challenges to international norms could destabilize the region, the alliance has a role to play beyond deterrence of North Korean provocations.

In the coming years, North Korea could even become a partner in maintaining peace in East Asia, provided that the Kim regime follows through with the denuclearization process under an international verification team. In this scenario, which I call the Vietnamization of North Korea, the country would become a neutral zone of economic prosperity and potentially shift from being an adversary to an ally of the United States in its competition with China.

Russia's Game on the Korean Peninsula: Accepting China's Rise to Regional Hegemony?

Artyom Lukin

ARTYOM LUKIN is an Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations and Deputy Director for Research in the School of Regional and International Studies at Far Eastern Federal University in Vladivostok, Russia. He can be reached at <artlukin@mail.ru>.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines Sino-Russian interactions regarding North Korea and considers the implications for Russia's wider policy toward East Asia.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Russia's behavior toward the Korean Peninsula is determined by a complex mix of motives and interests that include a commitment to nonproliferation, desire to avert war on the Russian Far Eastern border, pursuit of economic benefits, and consideration of great-power prestige. Moscow's quasi-alliance with Beijing is another factor in Russian policies toward North Korea, and an increasingly salient one. The Kremlin is aware that North Korea is vital for China's security and recognizes that Beijing's stakes in the Korean Peninsula are significantly higher than Moscow's. In return for its cooperation, Moscow expects Beijing's acknowledgment of Russian interests in areas of paramount concern, such as the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The last year saw the emergence, and even institutionalization of sorts, of a Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang alignment. This recalls the 1950s when the three were Communist allies against the U.S.—only this time it is Beijing, rather than Moscow, that is the leader in the trio. Russia's willingness to play second fiddle to China on the Korean Peninsula should be placed in the wider East Asian context. This disinclination to balance China's rising influence in East Asia is primarily due to the fact that most of the region lies outside the area of Russia's vital national interests. Chinese expansionism in East Asia and the Pacific benefits Russia because it diverts U.S. attention and resources from confrontation with Moscow in Europe.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Close collaboration between Beijing and Moscow on North Korea could pose serious problems for Washington. It is likely that after the failed Hanoi summit Pyongyang will seek, and receive, support from China and Russia, thus making it less inclined to accept the denuclearization demands from the U.S.
- Sino-Russian cooperation on the Korean Peninsula may be an indication of more things to come. In the coming years, the U.S. may have to confront a China-Russia united front, or at least their tacit coordination, on other security issues in the Indo-Pacific.
- At some point, Washington may be forced to seek Moscow's collaboration in managing the challenge from Beijing. The Kremlin is unlikely to participate in any containment of China, but it might agree to distance itself from Beijing's agenda in East Asia and become a neutral player. However, Washington will have to first normalize relations with Moscow.

Since the late nineteenth century, Russia has been a major stakeholder in Korean affairs, at times even exercising critical influence on them. Although the United States and China are at present the preeminent external influences on the peninsula, Russia remains a consequential actor. One important source of leverage is its close ties to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).¹ Moscow has long-standing political, humanitarian, and commercial links with its neighbor across the Tumangan River (known as the Tumannaya River in Russia and the Tumen River in China). The Russian ambassador to Pyongyang recently remarked that bilateral relations are “very frank,” “friendly,” and possibly “even better than they used to be under the Soviet Union.”² Moscow's interests on the peninsula are backed by its formidable military assets in Northeast Asia. In case of a North Korea contingency, Russia has the capacity to intervene militarily, aiding or derailing moves by other players.

Russia's behavior toward the Korean Peninsula has been determined by a complex mix of motives and interests that include its commitment to nonproliferation, desire to avert war on the border with the Russian Far East, pursuit of economic benefits, and ambition for great-power prestige. The country's quasi-alliance with China is another factor, and an increasingly salient one, in Russian policies toward Korean affairs. In pursuing its diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula, Moscow has collaborated closely with its main strategic partner, Beijing. Even though Russia's interests regarding North Korea are not fully aligned with China's, there is enough overlap to establish effective cooperation.

The essay explores the dynamics of Sino-Russian interactions with respect to North Korea. It pays special attention to the emergence of a Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang alignment, which is in a sense a return to the 1950s when the same three capitals were Communist allies against the United States. The essay then places Russian policies on the Korean Peninsula within the wider geopolitical context of East Asia and argues that Moscow has made a strategic choice to tolerate China's drive for preeminence in the region.

The Russia-China Axis and North Korea

After the end of the Cold War, Russia more or less delegated the task of looking after North Korea to China. During discussions in the United Nations or other forums on North Korean misbehavior, Moscow usually let Beijing do the job of advocating for Pyongyang. However, the situation changed in late 2013 when relations between North Korea and China began to deteriorate in the wake of the execution of Jang Song-thaek, who was considered China's closest ally in the North Korean leadership. The North started to display a desire to move away from China and closer to Russia. In 2017, the North Korean press launched a direct rhetorical assault on China, accompanied by Pyongyang's de facto boycott of high-level political contacts with Beijing. For its part, China backed the U.S.-initiated sanctions resolutions against the DPRK at the UN Security Council and began to enforce them in earnest, applying significant pressure to the North Korean economy. During the same period, North Korea was one of the few states that supported Russia following the 2014 crisis around Ukraine and Crimea, and diplomatic exchanges between Moscow

¹ For a detailed analysis of Russia-DPRK ties, see Artyom Lukin et al., “Nuclear Weapons and Russian–North Korean Weapons,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 29, 2017, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/11/nuclear-weapons-russian-north-korean-relations>.

² “Posol RF v Phenyane: KNDR ne poluchila ‘ni kopeiki’ za priznanie Kryma chastyu Rossii” [Interview with Russian Ambassador to the DPRK Alexander Matsegora], TASS, February 7, 2018, <http://tass.ru/politika/4936217>.

and Pyongyang remained active. Whenever anti-DPRK sanctions were discussed at the UN Security Council, it was Russia, rather than China, that tended to be the most ardent defender of Pyongyang, working to soften the proposed penalties as much as possible.

As acrimony between China and North Korea lasted from late 2013 to early 2018, Moscow showed few signs of exploiting the split or expanding its own influence over the DPRK at China's expense. There were some weak attempts to increase business links with the North, but they failed. A consortium of private Russian companies, backed by Russia's then minister for development of the Russian Far East, Alexander Galushka, tried to pursue commercial opportunities in North Korea in the wake of Pyongyang's break with Beijing. In 2014, the project "Pobeda" (Victory) was announced, which envisioned Russian firms gaining access to North Korean minerals in exchange for investments in the North's dilapidated railway network.³ However, the project, which carried an estimated cost of \$25 billion, never got off the ground because the Russian side apparently lacked financial resources. Galushka also stated Russia's intention to trade directly with the North, rather than exporting Russian products to the DPRK through Chinese intermediaries.⁴ However, the crisis over North Korea's nuclear and missile tests in 2016–17 made those plans moot, and Galushka himself left the government in May 2018.

In the diplomatic realm, Russia stepped up coordination with China. In April 2015 the two countries launched a regular vice-ministerial dialogue on security in Northeast Asia centered on Korean issues, with meetings normally conducted twice a year.⁵ The delegates to the dialogue include not only diplomats but also representatives from defense ministries.⁶ In July 2017, Moscow and Beijing announced their unified position on the North Korean crisis. During the summit between Putin and Xi Jinping in Moscow on July 4, 2017, a joint statement was adopted by the foreign ministers of the two countries. The statement put forward a joint initiative that combined the previous Chinese proposals for a "double freeze" (the halt of nuclear and missile programs by the North in exchange for a suspension of massive U.S.-ROK military drills) and "parallel advancement" (simultaneous talks on the denuclearization and the creation of peace mechanisms on the peninsula) with the Russian-proposed stage-by-stage Korean settlement plan.⁷ It was the first time that China and Russia so clearly articulated their common position with respect to North Korea.

In issuing the joint statement, Moscow and Beijing explicitly linked the resolution of the North Korea problem to the United States' willingness to make major strategic concessions in Northeast Asia. Russia and China insisted that "allied relations between separate states should not inflict damage on the interests of third parties" and expressed opposition to "any military presence of extra-regional forces in Northeast Asia" as well as to "the deployment of THAAD antimissile systems." The July 4 statement ends with Russia and China vowing "to protect the two countries'

³ Yonho Kim, "Russia, North Korea Strike Deal: Improved Railway for Mineral Resources," Voice of America, November 8, 2014, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-to-overhaul-north-koreas-railway-in-return-for-mineral-resources/2513493.html>.

⁴ "Alexander Galushka: Rossiya i KNDR rasschityvayut na vzaimovыgodnoye sotrudnichestvo bez posrednikov" [Alexander Galushka: Russia and the DPRK Aim for Mutually Beneficial Cooperation without Intermediaries], Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East (Russia), October 14, 2015, http://minvostokrazvitiya.ru/press-center/news_minvostok/?ELEMENT_ID=3713.

⁵ "O pervom raunde rossiysko-kitayskogo dialoga po bezopasnosti v Severo-Vostochnoy Azii" [On the First Meeting of Russia-China Dialogue on Security in Northeast Asia], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia), April 25, 2015, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1207275.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia), Press Release, October 10, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2895093.

⁷ "Joint Statement by the Russian and Chinese Foreign Ministries on the Korean Peninsula's Problems," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia), July 4, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2807662.

security interests and to ensure a strategic balance in the region.” In other words, China and Russia want the United States to weaken its strategic grip on Northeast Asia, at least with respect to the Korean Peninsula and the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Sino-Russian diplomatic coordination was again on display in September and December 2017 when the UN Security Council passed new sanctions punishing North Korea for nuclear and missile testing. To the surprise of many, Russia supported tough penalties on the North, even though it had previously insisted that “pressure through sanctions has run its course and doesn’t work.”⁸ Russia did not even object to the introduction of a phased-out ban on the use of North Korean labor, despite the fact that the country is the biggest importer of contracted workers from the DPRK and depends considerably on such labor for construction projects in the Russian Far East. Chinese lobbying was the most important reason for Moscow’s decision to go along with the UN Security Council vote penalizing North Korea. U.S. efforts to get Russia’s consent for more stringent sanctions would most likely have failed.

The situation on the peninsula has radically changed since January 2018 after Kim Jong-un began a charm offensive directed at Seoul and Washington, which has also substantially improved Pyongyang’s relations with Beijing. From March 2018 to February 2019, Kim held three summits with Moon Jae-in, two summits with Donald Trump, and four meetings with Xi Jinping. Russia, as well as Japan, has apparently faced some marginalization during this upsurge in diplomacy. A summit between Putin and Kim, even though agreed to in principle during Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s visit to Pyongyang in May 2018, has yet to take place as of the time of writing.

Negotiations on Korean affairs are thus now shaping up as a four-party process, involving North and South Korea, the United States, and China, and leaving out Russia and Japan. However, in public statements, Moscow brushes aside concerns that it has been marginalized. In particular, Lavrov expressed confidence that “our Chinese friends” had no intention of sidelining Russia in the North Korea talks.⁹ Top Russian officials, including Putin himself, have repeatedly praised China as the country that has contributed the most to the current diplomatic progress on the peninsula.¹⁰ Russian diplomats emphasize that they have been “very closely collaborating” with their Chinese counterparts, with bilateral consultations taking place in Beijing and Moscow “almost on a monthly basis.”¹¹

The Russia-China collaboration in Northeast Asia is just one element of their “comprehensive strategic partnership,” which has only grown tighter under Trump. As Gilbert Rozman points out, North Korea has been the primary test of the U.S.-China-Russia strategic triangle in Asia, and Russia has sided with China.¹² Moscow is unlikely to do anything on the peninsula that would run against the basic interests of its main strategic partner. The Kremlin is well aware that North Korea is vital for China’s security and recognizes that Beijing’s stakes in the Korean Peninsula are significantly higher than Moscow’s. What it expects in return is Beijing’s acknowledgment of

⁸ “Nebenzia: Sanktsii v otnoshenii KNDR ne rabotayut, nuzhno iskat’ mirny put’ uregulirovaniya” [Nebenzia: Sanctions against the DPRK Don’t Work, Peaceful Ways of Settlement Should Be Looked For], TASS, September, 2, 2017, <http://tass.ru/politika/4526372>.

⁹ Sergey Lavrov (remarks, Moscow, April 10, 2018), http://www.mid.ru/vistupleniya_ministra/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQuMdqBY/content/id/3162263.

¹⁰ See, for example, Vladimir Putin (remarks at the Valdai Club meeting, Sochi, October 18, 2018), http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58848?fbclid=IwAR1fE28r0ejQ0M_8_vC3ZEnOHexUv6a0Nuu8gg65K6gWxDAYYSlnlHnUbg.

¹¹ “Zamglavy MID RF: SShA priglasili nas k sebe dlya dialoga po KNDR” [Interview with Deputy FM Igor Morgulov], TASS, October 20, 2018, <https://tass.ru/interviews/5699045>.

¹² Gilbert Rozman, “Giving a New Jolt to Strategic Triangle Analysis,” Asan Forum, August 30, 2017, <http://www.theasanforum.org/giving-a-new-jolt-to-strategic-triangle-analysis>.

Russia's interests in the areas of paramount concern to Moscow, such as Ukraine and the Middle East. There might even be a tacit agreement between the two partners that Moscow defers to Beijing on Northeast Asian issues, while China in return recognizes Russia's leading role in the Middle East.¹³

If there are any differences between Russia and China on the Korean Peninsula, they are manageable and have been effectively handled. For example, when Sino-North Korean relations rapidly deteriorated from 2013 through 2017, Russia did not make any attempt to fill China's role on the peninsula, even though Pyongyang made inviting gestures to Moscow. When the Kremlin displayed heightened diplomatic activism with regard to North Korea in 2017, being at that time the only major power with more or less friendly relations with the Kim regime, it was not meant to be at the expense of China. Rather, Russia sought to defuse a dangerous crisis on its Far Eastern border while also hoping to increase its leverage over the United States. At any rate, all the major moves that Moscow undertook with regard to North Korea were coordinated with Beijing.

The China-Russia-DPRK Bloc Reborn?

With China-DPRK rapprochement moving apace and Russia-DPRK relations already quite warm, 2018 saw the emergence, and even institutionalization of sorts, of a Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang bloc. In October, Russia, China, and North Korea, represented by deputy foreign ministers, held their first-ever official trilateral meeting in Moscow. They issued a joint statement calling for the easing of the UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea to reward Pyongyang for its "important denuclearization steps." The statement also called for establishing "mutual trust." The process of trust-building should be "phased and synchronous in nature and accompanied by reciprocal steps by the states involved."¹⁴ In effect, this formula reiterates Pyongyang's long-held mantra and contradicts the U.S. stance that any significant rewards to the DPRK, such as the removal of sanctions and the signing of a peace treaty, can only happen after North Korea's full denuclearization. In another jab at the United States, the three sides denounced "unilateral sanctions." The present China-Russia-DPRK coalition is in a sense a throwback to the 1950s, when the same three countries were Communist allies against the United States—only this time it is Beijing, rather than Moscow, that is the leader in this trio.

The tripartite diplomatic alignment of Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang currently stands in clear opposition to U.S. strategic goals in Northeast Asia. However, it is not at all clear how viable and durable this coalition will be. Beijing, and to a lesser degree Moscow, would certainly like to use the trilateral alignment to diminish U.S. strategic dominance in Northeast Asia and drive the United States out of the Korean Peninsula. The question is whether North Korea is willing to join China and Russia in their anti-U.S. drive.

Pyongyang is definitely seeking rapprochement with Washington and might even be interested in the continued presence of U.S. forces in Northeast Asia as a hedge against China. Kim Jong-un

¹³ Andrey Kortunov, "Pyongyang Is Starts and Wins. What Can the Losers Do?" Russian International Affairs Council, November 13, 2017, <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/pyongyang-is-starts-and-wins-what-can-the-losers-do/>.

¹⁴ "Sovmestnoye informatsionnoye kommyunike o trekhstoronnikh konsul'tatsiyakh zamestiteley ministrov inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii, Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respubliki i Koreyskoy Narodno-Demokraticeskoy Respubliki" [Joint Informational Communiqué about the Three-Party Consultations by the Deputy Foreign Ministers of the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia), October 10, 2018, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckN0nkJE02Bw/content/id/3370331?c=1542074246062.

apparently hopes to achieve a grand bargain with Washington that would normalize relations while leaving the DPRK as a de facto nuclear power. It is quite possible that Washington eventually agrees to a deal that would see North Korea relinquish its intercontinental ballistic missile capability and the most visible elements of its nuclear program while retaining the core nuclear potential. With China rapidly becoming the overriding geopolitical concern for the United States, a nuclear North Korea might even be considered at some point as an important asset in balancing Beijing in Northeast Asia, somewhat similar to how Washington saw a nuclear-armed Communist China as a counterforce to the Soviet Union. Strategically, North Korea could well be the Vietnam of Northeast Asia: a country that used to be a bitter enemy of the United States but becomes a close partner and friend thanks to a changed geopolitical context. Like Vietnam, North Korea is extremely good at playing games between contending major powers. From the 1960s until the 1980s, Pyongyang was engaged in an artful game with Moscow and Beijing, playing both ends against the middle. There is good reason to predict that Kim will try to pull off the same trick by exploiting the intensifying rivalry between Washington and Beijing. Ironically, in the Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang triad, North Korea may turn out to be the most pro-U.S., with intriguing implications for Northeast Asia's geopolitics.

Leaving East Asia to China?

Russia's relative passivity on the Korean Peninsula is partly explained by its limited economic resources. Competing with Beijing for the status of Pyongyang's chief patron would require hefty financial commitments that Moscow can hardly afford. According to well-informed Russian sources, China spends at least one billion dollars a year subsidizing North Korea.

Furthermore, North Korea lacks appeal to Russia's most powerful vested interests, such as the oil and gas industry and the military-industrial complex. Unlike Middle Eastern countries or Venezuela, North Korea has no oil and gas reserves. Admittedly, there is a long-standing idea for a trans-Korean natural gas pipeline that would bring Russian gas to South Korea via the North. However, Russia's Gazprom does not currently view this project as a priority in its Asian strategy due to the many risks involved and the uncertainty about the sources of funding for its construction. For Russia's defense companies, North Korea is of little interest because it does not have much cash, not to mention the fact that international sanctions prohibit the export of military hardware to the country. For Russia's most powerful economic actors, and apparently for the Kremlin itself, the bottom line is that you cannot make money on North Korea.

State-owned Russian Railways is Russia's only major company with a tangible stake in North Korea, owning the Khasan-Rajin rail and port venture in which it invested \$300 million. Although Russian Railways is interested in realizing the idea of connecting the Trans-Korean Railway network with the Trans-Siberian Railway, the company is not counted among Russia's most powerful lobbyists and does not have connections to the Kremlin on par with Rosneft, Gazprom, or Rostec. Moreover, even though the Khasan-Rajin venture is exempt from UN Security Council sanctions, the project has been mostly idle since 2017 due to the toxic environment around any commerce involving North Korea.

Russian deference to China on issues related to the Korean Peninsula, albeit somewhat hurting Moscow's great-power pride, does make geopolitical sense. As discussed above, the East Asian and Pacific theater south of the Russian Far East is neither the top economic nor the top political

priority for Moscow. Although its geopolitical vision for a “greater Eurasia” nominally encompasses East Asia, the Kremlin treats Pacific affairs as an area of lower concern than Europe, the Middle East, or Central Asia.¹⁵ The only time the Pacific dominated Russian grand strategy was a brief period in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century when Czar Nicholas II and his entourage entertained the ambition to make the Russian empire the master of Northeast Asia. Those grand designs abruptly ended with Russia’s humiliating defeat to Japan in 1905. After the Russo-Japanese War, Russia has never again attempted to play a leading role in East Asia, saving strategic resources for other regions it deemed of higher importance, such as Europe and the Middle East. In order to be a first-tier power in the Asia-Pacific, Russia would need to have a significant economic presence in the region and strong naval capabilities to project power in a mainly maritime theater. Moscow understands that it lacks both of these prerequisites and is under no illusion that it may develop them in the foreseeable future.

The Kremlin appears to have chosen to refrain from balancing China in East Asia, and there is mounting evidence that it may even be aiding Chinese hegemonic pursuits in the region. Although its official stance on the South China Sea disputes is strict neutrality, Russia has recently tilted in favor of Beijing. For example, following the July 2016 Hague tribunal ruling that rejected China’s claims to sovereignty in the South China Sea, Putin publicly expressed solidarity with Beijing, calling the international court’s decision “counterproductive.”¹⁶ This statement was backed by the first-ever joint drills conducted by Chinese and Russian warships in the South China Sea. The two countries practiced antisubmarine, island-seizing, and other activities, while Chinese and Russian forces participated in operations that were billed as the largest operations ever between the two countries’ navies.¹⁷

Russian weapons sales to Vietnam are often cited as evidence of the Kremlin’s desire to balance China in Southeast Asia. This is far from reality. Russia sells Vietnam weapons not because it seeks to counteract China. Instead, its main motive is to keep Vietnam as one of the few major customers of the Russian military-industrial complex. Vietnam is Russia’s long-time friend and chief partner in Southeast Asia, but if at some point Russia were forced to choose between Hanoi and Beijing, the outcome would be predetermined. Any significance that Southeast Asia may hold for Russia is not comparable to its current stakes in maintaining good relations with China.

In the East China Sea, where China disputes territory with Japan, Russia used to maintain neutrality. However, this now may be *de facto* changing, too. In June 2016, Russian and Chinese warships simultaneously sailed close to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, raising concerns in Tokyo that the incident might have been a coordinated show of force.¹⁸

However, the most crucial test of Russian support for China may come on the problem of Taiwan. I recall listening a decade ago to a senior foreign policy expert from Moscow who was very open about Russia’s disinterest in the mainland overtaking the *de facto* independent island because such a development would significantly increase China’s geopolitical clout. At that time, this was the prevailing view in Moscow. Now the calculation is different. There is little doubt that

¹⁵ Vladimir Putin (speech at the Belt and Road International Forum, Beijing, May 14, 2017), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54491>.

¹⁶ Jack Stubbs and Katya Golubkova, “Putin: Outside Interference in South China Sea Dispute Will Do Only to Harm,” Reuters, September 5, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-g20-russia-china/putin-outside-interference-in-south-china-sea-dispute-will-do-only-to-harm-idUSKCN11B1QC>.

¹⁷ Ben Blanchard, “China, Russia Naval Drill in South China Sea to Begin Monday,” Reuters, September 11, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-china-russia-idUSKCN11H051>.

¹⁸ Tim Kelly, “Japan Protests after Chinese Warship Sails Near Disputed East China Sea Islands,” Reuters, June 8, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-china-islands-idUSKCN0YV01U>.

Russia would extend diplomatic and possibly even some form of military support to China if it were to decide to forcibly reunify with Taiwan. It would be all the more happy to endorse China's taking back control of Taiwan if Beijing were to formally recognize Russian sovereignty over Crimea. Russia's sales to China of highly capable weapons, such as S-400 surface-to-air missile systems and Su-35 fighter jets, are already helping Beijing create a "no-go zone" around Taiwan to deter U.S. forces from intervening in a contingency.

Conclusion

At present, the Kremlin's main geopolitical game is in the Middle East rather than East Asia. In the wake of Russia's bold intervention in Syria, the Middle East is consuming most of Moscow's foreign policy attention and diplomatic resources, raising the question of how much is left to spare elsewhere. This is not to say that Moscow has ignored the Korean Peninsula. It certainly still treats the peninsula as more or less a secondary priority on the list of Russian foreign policy concerns.

This disinclination to balance China's rising influence in East Asia, be it on the Korean Peninsula or in the East and South China Seas, is primarily due to the fact that most of the region lies outside the area of Russia's vital national interests. Instead, the country's overriding priority in East Asia is defensive: maintaining sovereignty over the geopolitically vulnerable Russian Far East. As long as Russia remains a formidable military and nuclear power, its Far Eastern territories are safe against aggression from any potential predator, be it China or another country.

In return for not opposing China's ambitions to re-emerge as the suzerain of East Asia, the Kremlin expects Chinese backing, or at least benevolent neutrality, in areas of prime significance to Russia like the Middle East or Eastern Europe. In addition, Chinese expansionism in East Asia and the Pacific benefits Russia because it diverts U.S. attention and resources from confrontation with Moscow in Europe.¹⁹ Moscow is enjoying the spectacle of China and the United States battling it out in the Asia-Pacific in the hope of reaping benefits from their epic competition.

At some point, Washington might even be forced to seek Moscow's collaboration in managing the massive challenge from Beijing. Although Russia is unlikely to participate in any containment of China, it might agree to cease backing China's efforts to construct a Sino-centric East Asia and become a neutral player in the region. However, to convince Russia to switch to neutrality, the United States will have to normalize relations and make some significant concessions, such as recognizing Russia's special interests in Eastern Europe and lifting sanctions. The normalization of U.S.-Russia relations would likely have a dual effect on Russia's policy toward China. First, Russia would relax its systemic balancing of the United States and thus have much less incentive to strategically collaborate with China in the Asia-Pacific theater. Second, if Russia feels secure on its western and southern borders, it will have much more freedom of action in East Asia to play its own game independent of Beijing, which would, to a degree, help balance China's ambitions.

¹⁹ "Retired U.S. General Says War with China Likely in 15 Years," Associated Press, October 25, 2018, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/retired-u-s-general-says-war-china-likely-15-years-n924031>.

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China's Strategic Cooperation with Russia and the Neutralization of the Korean Peninsula

Jaewoo Choo

JAEWOO CHOO is a Professor of Chinese Foreign Policy in the Department of Chinese Studies at Kyung Hee University in South Korea. He can be reached at <jwc@khu.ac.kr>.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the linkage between China's and Russia's geopolitical struggles against the U.S. and their end goal of expelling U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula and considers U.S. policy options.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Cooperation between China and Russia is geopolitically driven to offset the political and security vulnerabilities stemming from their power struggle against the U.S.-led order. They need to overcome the inherent disadvantages embedded in their asymmetric power relations with the U.S. by aligning with each other for the time being and ultimately by neutralizing the Korean Peninsula through dismantlement of the U.S. alliance with the Republic of Korea (ROK). China and Russia have promoted a double-track approach that seeks to replace the Korean Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty in return for North Korea's denuclearization. Ironically, President Donald Trump's long-held doubts about the efficacy of alliances, and thus his desire to reduce U.S. force levels on the peninsula, which led him to engage directly with the North, now appear to be in line with China's and Russia's solutions to the North's denuclearization question.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- If Trump continues to discount the value of alliances for economic reasons and agrees to reduce U.S. force levels on the peninsula as a security assurance to North Korea, such actions will only help China and Russia achieve their goal of decoupling U.S.-ROK alliance relations and ultimately expelling U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula.
- Likewise, if Trump continues to question the effectiveness of extended deterrence and joint military exercises, U.S. rivals could take the opportunity not only to neutralize the Korean Peninsula but also to further expand their influence in the region, thereby significantly undermining U.S. primacy.
- If the U.S. fails both to recognize the strategic implications of China's and Russia's vision for a permanent peace settlement on the Korean Peninsula and to update the alliance system, its inaction may well be perceived as an indicator of U.S. disinterest in upholding American values such as democracy, liberty, and free markets, let alone its commitment to alliances, thereby endangering trust and the country's credibility as the world leader.

The cooperative relationship between China and Russia has increased, driven by common geostrategic interests and vulnerability. From this perspective, the Korean Peninsula is one place where the two countries can offset their respective vulnerabilities stemming from the power struggle against the U.S.-led order. Geopolitically, China and Russia are wary of U.S. hegemony and desire to sustain their geographic spheres of influence in their peripheries by working together to manage their U.S. relations. Both countries face a power asymmetry with the United States and its alliance system that impedes their ultimate geostrategic interests in keeping their traditional peripheral regions free of U.S. influence and presence.¹

Traditionally continental powers, neither China nor Russia can afford to fall into a simultaneous conflict with a stronger power on two fronts. As long as power asymmetry with the United States persists, activities on one front will require diverting attention from the other. In the case of such power asymmetry, weaker states have the strategic option to bandwagon, align, or ally against stronger states. In East Asia, where the power distribution among the United States, China, and Russia is not balanced, alignment strategy has been a popular choice. China siding with the former Soviet Union during the first two decades of the Cold War, U.S. rapprochement with China in the 1970s, and Russia's realignment with China in the 21st century are the results of asymmetric triangular power relationship dynamics. In the following sections, the geopolitical force that facilitated the strategic alignment of China and Russia on Korean Peninsula affairs is first examined in order to explain why China initiated the move. What the two countries want to derive from their cooperation against the United States will be analyzed to complement the policy implications drawn from this study.

Sino-Russian Strategic Alignment and the Korean Peninsula

Strategic alignment around the Korean Peninsula is noteworthy because of its purposes. The goal is to neutralize the peninsula through a balanced distribution of power in order to prevent it from becoming another front of conflict that no one can afford. China is more preoccupied with the territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas and preserving its influence in Central and South Asia. Russia, for its part, is concerned with the U.S. presence in its border regions, particularly in the Baltic States, Crimea, and Central Asia. Both countries are concerned by the U.S.-led eastward expansion of NATO and its geostrategic consequences. Hence, China and Russia want to work together in the denuclearization process in order to dissolve the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) and thus neutralize the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, they hope to preserve influence over North Korea through diplomatic collaboration at the United Nations on its behalf with the goal of preserving a balance of power on the peninsula.

Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang are motivated to cooperate for geopolitical and economic reasons. In the case of Moscow and Pyongyang, economic dependence on China and the geopolitical struggle against the United States are key factors. China is both Russia's and North Korea's largest trading partner and investor. Russia became more economically dependent on China following the Western sanctions imposed in the wake of the Ukraine crisis in 2014.²

¹ Paul J. Bolt, "Sino-Russian Relations in a Changing World Order," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (2014): 49.

² Pavel K. Baev, "Three Turns in the Evolution of China-Russia Presidential Pseudo-Alliance," *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1–15.

North Korea is also faced with sanctions from both the United Nations and the United States for conducting nuclear and missile tests.

Strengthened strategic cooperation among China, Russia, and North Korea has given them an advantage in the geopolitical struggle against U.S. hegemony in Northeast Asia. The United States and South Korea, for instance, have become receptive to the notion of declaring an end to the Korean War and replacing the Korean Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty in exchange for North Korea's denuclearization. President Donald Trump's reconsideration of the costs and benefits of maintaining overseas alliances and plans for a possible withdrawal or reduction of overseas forces appear to fall in line with North Korea's security assurance demands. South Korea seems to be falling into this trap as well by advocating for a permanent peace system while seemingly not realizing the consequences.

The possibility of replacing the armistice agreement with a peace treaty was first introduced by China in March 2017 as part of a broader North Korean denuclearization package. The package included "double suspension" (the simultaneous suspension of North Korea's nuclear testing and U.S.-ROK joint military exercises) and the "double-track approach" (the simultaneous pursuit of denuclearization and peace).³ Russia's support was already in place as the original advocator during the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1993–94.⁴ Since Pyongyang proposed similar measures as preconditions for denuclearization as early as 2005 and most recently in 2016, it had no problem supporting this plan during Kim Jong-un's visit to Beijing in May.⁵ Empirical studies, however, have shown that a peace process and treaty would first require both the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea and the abolition of the U.S.-ROK alliance.⁶

China and Russia are thus on the same page with regard to the U.S. military presence in South Korea, and their cooperative security relationship is driven by the desire for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the peninsula and the dissolution of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Both together and separately, they have made these goals known on numerous occasions. Although the ultimate goal is North Korea's denuclearization, China and Russia want to exploit the nuclear crisis to advance their larger geopolitical and geostrategic goals on the Korean Peninsula and in East Asia more broadly.

Why Does China Need Outside Help?

The major powers of the Korean Peninsula, namely the United States, China, Russia, and Japan, traditionally view Korean affairs in a regional, if not global, context. Regional geopolitics dictates the outcomes of the great powers' strategic relationships toward both North Korea and South Korea. Hence, their Korean policies are dependent on their regional strategies, which are extensions of their global policies. This is clear from the statements that ensuring peace and

³ "Wang Yi tan ruhe yingdui bandao weiji: 'Shuangzhanting' he shangguibingjin silu" [Wang Yi Talks How to Solve Peninsula Danger: "Double Suspension" and Dual-Track Thinking Should Be Accounted], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Press Release, March 8, 2017, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/t1443990.shtml>.

⁴ "Russia Backs China's 'Double Suspension' on Korean Peninsula," *Global Times*, April 30, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1044682.shtml>.

⁵ Peter Wood, "China, Russia Commit to 'Dual Track' Approach toward Korean Peninsula Issues," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, July 7, 2017, 4–5.

⁶ Li Fuxing, "Sifang huitan weihe nanyi qude jinzhan" [Why 4-Party Talks Are Difficult to See Progress], *Guoji zhanwang*, no. 17 (1999): 7–9; Gong Keyu, "Ruhe goujian chaoxian bandao heping jizhe" [How to Build a Peace Institution on the Korean Peninsula], *Xiandai guoji guanxi*, no. 2 (2006): 19; Zhang Liankui, "Heping xieding yingyu qihe tongbu" [Peace Treaty Must Concur with Denuclearization], *Zhongguo xinwen zhouban*, no. 26 (2007): 46–47; and Yang Xiyu, "Guanyu jianli Chaoxian Bandao hepingjizhe de jige falu wenti" [Several Legal Problems Regarding Peace Mechanism on the Korean Peninsula], *Guoji wenti yanjiu*, no. 4 (2009): 34.

stability on the peninsula is the primary policy goal of all the great powers.⁷ Another goal is supporting peaceful Korean reunification without foreign intervention. The goal to have a nuclear-free peninsula was added after the first North Korean nuclear crisis. These goals cannot be realized without the involvement and participation of great powers, both for structural (alliance) and strategic (influence) interests.

Why does China need Russia's cooperation to achieve its goals on the Korean Peninsula, and what can the two countries gain from cooperating with one another? Answering these questions requires a deeper investigation into China's geopolitical and geostrategic goals and their implications, one that delves beneath mere diplomatic rhetoric. The compelling force behind China's cooperation with Russia is the asymmetric relationship with the United States. Due to increased U.S. presence in the region since the Obama administration adopted its strategy of rebalancing to Asia in 2010, avoiding a security dilemma with the United States has risen to the top of China's regional policy priorities. In Northeast Asia, China fears the intentions behind the United States' punitive measures against North Korea and seeks to deter what it defines as aggressive U.S. military expansionism and remove any opportunity for new military deployment. To avoid such a scenario from arising in response to North Korea's nuclear aspirations, Beijing must have the capability to control the situation. However, it seems unlikely that it has the influence required to achieve this goal.

China's strategic interests on the peninsula have over the years evolved beyond "alliance dilemma" and "buffer zone" theories. China has made clear its refusal to fall prey to an alliance entrapment that could arise from North Korea's provocations; however, it has also assured North Korea that it is committed to defending the country in the event of an external invasion. Beijing is confident that it can avoid alliance entrapment. It made an unofficial statement in response to North Korea's request for support for the invasion of the South in 1975.⁸ An official proclamation was later made in 1983 when Deng Xiaoping told then defense secretary Casper Weinberger of China's nonmilitary commitment to the North's invasion of the South.⁹ This stance was confirmed on different occasions by different leaders throughout the 1990s. Buffer zone theory is now overshadowed by new military operation concepts such as power-projection capability and forward deployment. Buffer zones have diminished in value due to the development of sophisticated advanced weapons like stealth and nuclear weapons.

China's repetitive denial of a military commitment to North Korea has substantially undermined their bilateral relationship and therefore its influence over the country. Already unorthodox by normal standards due to the absence of military bases, joint exercises, and defense trade, the China–North Korea relationship is no longer a patron-client relationship. The turning point was the two Koreas' joint membership to the United Nations in 1991, which enabled Pyongyang to bypass Beijing in communicating with the world.

On the surface, North Korea may seem heavily dependent on China for its economic survival. However, this dependence is not as significant as it used to be. Before the end of the Cold War, China was the second-largest aid provider to North Korea. This aid covered virtually everything, including daily goods and needs of the people, industrial goods like raw materials,

⁷ Young Whan Kihl, ed., *Korea and the World: Beyond the Cold War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 77, 88, 99, 114–15.

⁸ Chinese archives from Kim Il-sung's visit to Beijing in 1975 reveal China's refusal to support his plan to invade the South that year. See Xia Yafeng, "Geming yu huanhe: Zhongmei hejie jincheng zhong de Zhongguo dui Chao zhengce, 1970–1975" [Between Revolution and Détente: Beijing's Policy toward North Korea during the U.S.-China Rapprochement, 1970–1975], *Lengzhan guoji guanxishi yanjiu*, no. 16 (2013): 54.

⁹ Casper Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1990), 211.

and infrastructure and facilities. In the post-Cold War era, aid has been limited to food and fuel. It is difficult to know if this economic dependence has given China effective leverage over North Korea, especially in light of the lack of a security assurance and diplomatic support. In the triangular relationship with China and Russia, North Korea on some occasions has attempted to play one off the other to maximize its economic gains.

China's influence has been further undermined by North Korea's development of nuclear weapons. On its way to becoming a self-proclaimed nuclear power, North Korea has committed a series of successive military provocations that began with its first long-distance missile test in 1998 and continued with the first nuclear test in 2006 and the last nuclear test in 2017. China's security assurance by means of nuclear deterrence was refused by North Korea in the late 1980s. At that time, North Korea decided to become independent of China's protection in the face of nuclear threats from the United States and its deployment of strategic nuclear weapons to South Korea.

North Korea's provocative behavior has forced China to rethink its strategic interests on the Korean Peninsula and pursue the new goal of a nuclear-free peninsula. Furthermore, North Korea is becoming another security concern for China because its actions are leading the United States to fortify South Korea with advanced weapons that could threaten China.

Fortunately for China, Trump's interest in direct engagement with North Korea has already led the United States to incorporate a double-track approach as one of the viable topics for a denuclearization discussion. To Beijing, engagement at the head-of-state level between the United States and North Korea is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that it must seize to permanently neutralize the Korean Peninsula. China must find a new way to preserve, if not enhance, its influence on the peninsula to effectively counter a dangerous situation in the making posed by North Korea's emerging status as a nuclear power and the U.S. fortification of the South as exemplified by the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD).

China's Golden Opportunity and Russia's Aspiration to Become a Major Player

China and Russia have a long history of security cooperation. Since their first military alliance treaty in 1896, they have signed two subsequent treaties (in 1945 and 1951). These treaties were all prompted by one external factor: Japanese aggression. The first two were created based on their experiences with the Japanese military invasion of the Korean Peninsula before the invasion of the Chinese continent. The last treaty was motivated by concern about Japan's potential to repeat past aggression. As history indicates, China and Russia are sensitive to foreign advancement on the Korean Peninsula because of the easy access it provides to China and the Russian Far East.¹⁰

To date, this geostrategic concern has proved legitimate in both countries' eyes, and the struggle to defend geostrategic interests persists. China cannot afford to lose North Korea as a partner because of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Russia omitted defense commitments and responsibilities from its partnership with North Korea in 2000, but its new treaty with North Korea supposedly allows room for a security commitment contingency. The alliances and partnerships built by the United States and China are confrontational in character. The China-North Korea partnership, complemented by the Russia-North Korea treaty, is designed to preserve Chinese influence in

¹⁰ Xue Xiao-tian and Luan Jing-he, "Zhonghe guanxi de lishi yu xianshi" [Sino-Russian Relations: History and Reality], *Xiboliya yanjiu* 29, no. 3 (2002): 31–36.

Northeast Asia, while the U.S.-ROK alliance, supplemented by the U.S.-Japan alliance, is partly focused on containing China and Russia.

To Beijing, however, these alliances and partnerships are no longer an effective way to maintain the power equilibrium. Its concerns are attributed to three factors. First, Russia has an insufficient economic capacity to remain a patron state to North Korea. Second, the United States frequently raises the possibility of deploying of military measures against North Korea, despite its persistent efforts to solve nuclear challenges peacefully. In the eyes of Beijing, Washington's suggested plans to intervene militarily, including Operations Plan 5027 and Operations Plan 5029 in the case of a North Korean collapse, appear too aggressive. The United States also has threatened to employ preemptive strikes against nuclear development sites in North Korea. Third, from China's perspective, Washington seems to be exploiting the situation on the Korean Peninsula for its own advantage by deploying more advanced weapons in both South Korea and Japan to enhance its containment strategy against China. All three factors have disrupted the strategic balance of power in the region.

Under these circumstances, China felt compelled to propose a new set of solutions for the North Korean nuclear crisis in March 2017. It placed its long-sought diplomatic goal to drive the U.S. military presence from the Korean Peninsula as one of the conditions for the North's denuclearization. China is a shrewd and cunning negotiator and already enjoys a record of success against the United States. During the Cold War, China achieved its goal to normalize relations with the United States following the end of the Vietnam War. The withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Philippines due to a referendum vote was a bonus to China.

Beijing sees rapprochement between the United States and North Korea as an opportunity to advance its interests on both the Indochina Peninsula and Taiwan. Previously critical and non-negotiable interests are now expendable and negotiable. At the first summit in Singapore, Trump agreed to suspend all joint military exercises with South Korea due to his distrust in the efficacy of extended deterrence. He is also reportedly contemplating the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea because of economic reasons.¹¹ However coincidental it may be, Trump's plan offers China an opportunity to pursue its long-sought goal of neutralization of the Korean Peninsula through a perpetual peace settlement facilitated by the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces and the dissolution of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

At this critical juncture, China needs Russia's political and diplomatic support more than ever. Since its participation in the six-party talks, Russia has been accommodating of China's efforts to work toward North Korea's denuclearization. China needs Russia's continued support for three reasons. First, their cooperation is needed to press North Korea to denuclearize. Second, policy coordination with Russia is vital for not only sustaining sanctions on North Korea but also keeping the country from collapsing. Third, Russia's political support is critical to the realization of both a perpetual peace settlement founded on a peace treaty and the neutralization of the peninsula.

Hence, it would be a mistake to view cooperation between China and Russia from any rationale other than a geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic one. Their cooperative relationship is not bound or driven by ideology. Instead, their interests converge from a shared outlook on world affairs and common concerns about the governance structure and practices of the current U.S.-led liberal international order. At the regional level, the two countries' interests converge for

¹¹ "Trump Orders Pentagon to Consider Reducing U.S. Forces in South Korea," *New York Times*, May 3, 2018; and Tetsuo Kotani, "Imagining the Withdrawal of U.S. Forces from South Korea," *Diplomat*, August, 15, 2018.

the same reasons. At the national level, since 2000, Russia has worked to regain the influence and status in Korean affairs that it lost when it adopted a “two-Koreas policy” in the late 1980s and subsequently as a consequence of the first nuclear crisis in 1993.¹² At the time, post-Soviet Russia was struggling to establish a national identity that could fit its geographic stretch from Europe to Asia. The country sought to restore a balance and independence to its foreign policy that had been skewed toward the West. This pursuit of a balanced foreign policy was facilitated by NATO’s eastward expansion. Amid these external developments, the outbreak of the second North Korean nuclear crisis in 2003 offered an opportunity for Russia to re-establish its national identity as an eastern power. Ironically, it was at North Korea’s invitation that Russia joined the six-party talks.¹³

Beijing was cognizant of Moscow’s foreign policy objectives and thus undertook a proactive approach to induce its cooperation in order to counter potential collective pressure from the United States and its allies. In particular, China’s embrace of a security partnership with Russia followed from its recognition of Russia’s aforementioned geopolitical desires and dissatisfaction with the U.S.-led world order and governance. This partnership was heightened by both countries’ concerns about the prospective consequences of the U.S. rebalancing strategy toward Asia under the Obama administration. As a result, Russia’s and China’s relationships with the United States will likely continue to be characterized by mistrust, misperception, and misunderstanding, which could cause a security dilemma to arise.

Policy Implications

China’s proposal for the denuclearization of North Korea seems to be garnering much support from regional players. To address this situation, the United States should consider the following three policy options.

First, the United States must develop an effective countermeasure to China’s double-track approach. The strategic implications of the peace process must be scrutinized from multiple perspectives in order to avoid outcomes that undermine U.S. primacy and leadership in Northeast Asia. Institutional aspects of the regional order pillared on the U.S. alliance system must be considered. Second, Trump must reconsider his frequent statements expressing skepticism of the efficacy of alliances, extended deterrence, and joint military exercises overseas. He must realize that the value of protecting democracy, liberty, human rights, and free markets cannot be measured in terms of economic cost, nor is it reduced by the limitations of deterrence and joint exercises. Finally, the United States, South Korea, and Japan must seek creative alternatives to China’s and Russia’s shared vision for a permanent peace settlement on the Korean Peninsula so that the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances will remain intact. China’s double-track approach has been welcomed by the progressive South Korean president Moon Jae-in. Rather than fully embracing the double-track approach, Washington would be better off finding ways to induce Pyongyang to be more cooperative with the United States and its allies as well as strategies that can decouple North Korea from China.

¹² Pan Guanghui, “Lengzhanhou de Eluosi yu Chaoxian Bandao” [Post-Cold War Russia and the Korean Peninsula], *Donggouzhongya yanjiu*, no. 4 (2003): 63–68.

¹³ Alexander Zhebin, “The Bush Doctrine, Russia, and Korea,” in *Confronting the Bush Doctrine: Critical Views from the Asia-Pacific*, ed. Mel Gurtov and Peter Van Ness (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 143.

At the second summit between the United States and North Korea in the last days of February in Hanoi, Trump's offerings to his North Korean counterpart were exposed in subsequent press conferences and media interviews by the president himself and his aides. The U.S. definition of the North's denuclearization entails the full and verified dismantlement of all nuclear materials, all nuclear and missile development facilities, and all weapons of mass destruction, including biochemical weapons and ballistic missiles of all ranges, from short to intercontinental ones capable of carrying nuclear warheads. Cunningly, however, they did not allow even a silhouette to appear on U.S. reciprocal incentives to the North. If the ultimate means to achieving final, full, and verified dismantlement of the North's nuclear weapons is a security assurance through normalization of the bilateral relationship, the Trump administration must do it without altering the alliance system. Fortunately, at the time of writing, Trump has scrapped the plan to withdraw U.S. forces from South Korea, at least for now.¹⁴ Even in the future, he must abide by this decision for one critical reason: how the United States has preserved its regional strategic interests over the years deserves presidential appreciation. That the very foundation and the pillars of the regional order that has ultimately served U.S. interests and those of U.S. allies are non-negotiable must not be neglected or forgotten.

¹⁴ Kim Gamel, "Trump Says He Has 'No Plans' to Withdraw U.S. Troops from S. Korea," *Stars and Stripes*, February 3, 2019.



Seattle and Washington, D.C.

1414 NE 42ND STREET, SUITE 300
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98105 USA
PHONE 206-632-7370, FAX 206-632-7487

1819 L STREET NW, NINTH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036 USA
PHONE 202-347-9767, FAX 202-347-9766

NBR@NBR.ORG, WWW.NBR.ORG