

Russia and the Korean Crisis

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Abstract

Russian foreign policy on the Korean peninsula had always been defined by its economic and security priorities, but these priorities changed over the course of history. Division of Korea, the ongoing nuclear crisis, economic sanctions and information war point to the continuous tensions between at least three regional powers: the United States, Russia and China. Russia in this context attempts to play an important role of a negotiations' facilitator and behind-the-scene peace broker whose position may be unique in the ongoing talks. Its geographical proximity to Korea (Russian port of Vladivostok is situated in 100 km from the North Korean border), its historical ties to North Korea, but also its current economic ties to South Korea define its diplomatic position in ongoing negotiations. The fundamental goal of Russian policy in the region is the preservation of stability on the Korean peninsula. Russia seeks to find the optimal balance between all parties implicated in negotiations with the end-goal to play the role of a regional power broker and regain the influence it once had in the region.

Key words :

Russian foreign policy, the Korean peninsula, Division of Korea, the ongoing nuclear crisis, economic sanctions and information war, an important role of a negotiations' facilitator, behind-the-scene peace broker, historical ties to North Korea

Introduction

Russian foreign policy on the Korean peninsula had always been defined by its economic and security priorities, but these priorities changed over the course of history. In geopolitical terms, Korea may be viewed as a “power field”, where the power-drives of various international actors cross and/or oppose each other. The resulting tensions are reflected in all political formation within that field. Division of Koreas, the ongoing nuclear crisis, economic sanctions and information war point to the continuous tensions between at least three regional powers: the United States, Russia and China. Russia in this context attempts to play an important role of a negotiations’ facilitator and behind-the-scene peace broker whose position may be unique in the ongoing talks. Its geographical proximity to Korea (Russian port of Vladivostok is situated in 100 km from the North Korean border), its historical ties to North Korea, but also its current economic ties to South Korea define its diplomatic position in ongoing negotiations. The fundamental goal of Russian policy in the region is the preservation of stability on the Korean peninsula. Russia seeks to find the optimal balance between all parties implicated in negotiations with the end-goal to play the role of a regional power broker and regain the influence it once had in the region.

Brief Historical overview of Russian–Korean relations

Bilateral Russian–Korean relations begin at the end of the XIX century. The first treaty between the two states was signed on July 7, 1884. In April 1895, when China lost control over Korea, Russia used this opportunity to increase its influence on the Korean peninsula. By 1896 Russia became a major player in Korea: it provided protection to the king Gojong, its military instructors started training Korean troops, while Russian investors initiated a number important business and industrial projects in the peninsula. Increasing Russian influence led to an open rift with Japan and England. In 1904 a war between Russia and Japan broke out. Russia lost; disastrous results of the war led to the loss of the southern half of the Sakhalin Island, dramatic decline of Russia’s influence in the region, and provoked the first Russian Revolution in 1905. In 1910 Korea was annexed by Japan.

The period between the two world wars was marked by the growing influence of Japan in the Far East. After the Japanese defeat in 1945 and the division of two Koreas, the situation radically changed. The two major players in the region were

now the Soviet Union and the United States. The Soviets at the time were pursuing policy of creating buffer states on the periphery of its borders. The first (unsuccessful) attempt was made in Iran in 1945; later Soviet satellites were formed in Eastern Europe. In 1948, fearing the American military proximity, the Soviet Union created the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) as a form of a buffer state on the Korean Peninsula. The first de-facto Soviet ruler of North Korea, lieutenant-general Terenty Shtykov, helped to create the new state, formed its ruling cabinet and secured the rise to power of Kim Il-sung. It was Shtykov who convinced Stalin to support Kim’s invasion of South Korea. Yet, when the actual war broke out the Soviet Union, despite its military assistance to North Korea, demonstrated unwillingness to risk nuclear confrontation with the United States. Neither could general MacArthur secure the right to use nuclear weapons against North Korea. As a result, the conflict ended in a draw.

Following the 1953 cease-fire, the Soviet Union maintained a close relationship with North Korea. In 1961 two states signed the Friendship Treaty, which stipulated mutual military assistance in case one of the parties was under attack. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Soviet Union and the DPRK in the 1960s and 70s were not as simple and straight-forward as it appeared: in 1969 the Nixon administration had been assured by Moscow that it would not come to Pyongyang’s aid if it provoked another war in the Korean peninsula¹.

In the seventies North Korea started seeking new partners outside of the Communist bloc. Between 1970 and 1975 North Korea contracted \$1.2 billion in loans in the west. By 1974 North Korea imports from OECD countries “may have exceeded its imports from China, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe combined”.² Yet, despite trade and economic cooperation with the West, North Korean economic situation worsened and by the end of the 1980s North Korea was in economic isolation. Moreover, its former communist allies were pursuing active engagement with South Korea and the United States. Already in 1989 North Korea warned Moscow that it would develop its own nuclear program if USSR were to establish diplomatic relations with South Korea.³ The Soviet

1) Nicholas Eberstadt – The End of North Korea, American Enterprise Institute Press, 1999 Quoted in <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/e/eberstadt-korea.html>

2) Ibid

3) Russia of course was weary of the North Korean nuclear program, because Korean nuclear proliferation would destabilize regional security arrangements and induce nuclear arms race in East Asia. Funabashi, Yoichi – The Peninsula Question. A Chronicle of the Second Korean Nuclear Crisis, Brookings Institute Press, Washington, D.C., 2007, p.173

Union did and in 1990 recognized South Korea. From then on the Soviet Union, and later Russia, had to balance its interest in building relations with South Korea and a desire to maintain an uneasy strategic ally in the north.⁴

During the 1990s Russia was trying to secure closer ties with the West in general and South Korea in particular, at the same time maintaining a working relationship with the North. As Russian relations with the West deteriorated in the second half of the 1990s, due to the NATO expansion and the Balkan crisis, its relations with North Korea started to improve. By March 1999, as NATO was about to attack Serbia, Russia and North Korea agreed on the text and the Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborly Relations and Cooperation. It was signed in February 2000; starting in April 2000 covert preparations for a visit by Vladimir Putin to Pyongyang began. The first summit meeting between the new Russian leader and his Korean counterpart took place in July 2000 and a Joint Declaration was signed – the first international document signed by Kim Jong-il as leader of the DPRK. However, this strategic “friendship” did not last long.

Nuclear Crisis

When North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003, Russia expressed (deep concern) and President Putin reiterated that Russia was firmly committed to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.⁵ Around the same time, in 2003, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov, proposed to Kang Sok-ju, at the time responsible for overseeing North Korean relations with the United States, to start consultations among the six states – North and South Korea, Japan, China, US and Russia. North Koreans rejected this idea at the time.⁶ But Russia was so preoccupied by the North Korean withdrawal from NPT that was considering to offer North Korea security guarantees jointly with China, without any multilateral negotiations.⁷ At the same time, from the onset of the 2003 Korean nuclear crisis, Russia advocated economic measures that would diffuse tensions and lead to economic integration of North Korea into a common economic space. Russian economic approach relied on energy projects – developing Siberian oil and gas reserves and building pipelines for transport, and creating a common railway network. However, it also relied on “stick and carrot” approach. In July 2006

Russia supported United Nations Security Council Resolution 1695, condemning the North Korean missile test. Three years later, in June 2009, Russia supported the UN sanctions on North Korea. Yet, three years later in September 2012 Russia agreed to write off 90% of North Korea's \$11 billion debt to Russia as a sign of closer engagement with North Korea's new leader.⁸ The \$1 billion North Korea had to repay was agreed to be used to finance Russian investment in humanitarian and energy projects in North Korea.

Russian view of North Korean security situation in many ways reflected and continue to reflect its own security situation dilemma – defined by fear and uncertainty, at least as perceived by Moscow. This problem was highlighted by Vladimir Putin in Munich in 2007 when he talked about “guarantees that were made and that are not being observed today” regarding current NATO expansion toward Russia's borders. This declaration pointed to the lack of trust between Russia and NATO fifteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. North Korean abrasive behavior and its nuclear gambling have a similar nature and that is why Russian foreign policymakers and experts do not see North Koreans as “irrational”.⁹

Russia and South Korea

The main characteristic of international relations in the past ten years was continuing decline of Russia-US and Russia-NATO relations. Russia, following its traditional approach “when lost in the West, turn to the East” went on reinvigorating its foreign policy in Asia. Moscow's pursuit of closer economic ties with South Korea and it attempts to play a more assertive role with North Korea, constitute part of Russia's “Turn to the East” or Eurasian foreign policy strategy. For Russia, it is more strategically and politically gratifying to be a big fish in a small pond rather than a small fish in a big pond, especially in view of potential benefits. Russian policy in Korea pursues a double goal: on one hand Russia wants to minimize even the faintest chance of a nuclear confrontation, because it shares common border with North Korea, while on the other hand it wants to balance off American and Chinese influence in the region and increase its own. It is therefore only logical that Russia would feel uneasy about both Kim Jong-un missile tests and the American response to these tests.

By moving closer to South Korea, Russia gains both politically and economically. Russia's goal

4) Ibid, p.175

5) Ibid, p.167

6) Ibid, p.168

7) Ibid, p.169

8) <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2012/sep/18/russia-writes-off-north-korea-debt>

9) Nuclear Weapons And Russian-North Korean Relations, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, 2017, p.8

is to play a role of a regional peace broker. The ongoing episode of the North–South drama is a good opportunity for Russia to make a comeback as a regional power and improve its image as a peace maker in the region and worldwide. Economically Russia may also gain. Already in 1991, after normalization, South Korea provided \$1,5 billion in loans to the Soviet Union, and later another \$1,5 billions to Russia.¹⁰ Before 1979 annual trade between the two countries was less than \$1 million.¹¹ Already Gorbachev wanted to develop the Russian Far East and Siberia by integrating the Soviet economy into rapidly developing Asia–Pacific community. Later president Roh Tae-woo introduced his “Northern Policy” designed to improve political and economic relations with Russia. Moscow and Seoul recognize the opportunities that the Far East provides for closer cooperation, and the presidents of both countries have vowed to foster development in the region. Russia’s domestic interests in developing the Far East are influencing in trade ties between two states. Historically, the Russian Far East has been one of the most underdeveloped regions of Russia. Today closer cooperation between Russia and South Korea may diversify investment to Russia’s Far East and offer an alternative as well as a supplement to the Chinese investment in the region.

Russia needs to keep peace on the Korean peninsula, because it still plans to develop a number of prospective projects one of which is a railway through Russia, connecting both North and South Korea to the EU. The other is the Transkorean gas pipeline. Realization of such a plan will help transform the current standoff to a situation of mutually beneficial economic cooperation. Speaking at the 2017 Eastern Economic Forum, President Moon Jae in noted the compatibility of Russia’s new East Asia policy and South Korea’s new northern policy. Moon described the potential areas of Russia–South Korea economic cooperation as constituting ‘nine bridges’, which range from gas infrastructure to seaports to Arctic shipping routes. Even prior to the 2017 Forum, the Russian Far East was at the center of economic relations with South Korea. According to Yury Trutnev, Russian Presidential Envoy for the Far Eastern Federal District, commodity turnover between the two countries grew 50 per cent during the first half of 2017, and Russian exports to South Korea were up by 40 per cent.¹²

After the 2017 Eastern Economic Forum (an event that Russia holds to encourage investment in the Russian Far East), the Korea Trade–Investment Promotion Corporation vowed to help South Korean firms planning to operate in Russia. As its broader plan, Moscow and Seoul hope to establish a major free trade agreement with Russia and members of the Eurasian Economic Union after the Trump administration created uncertainty over the future of the United States–Korea Free Trade Agreement,

Russia and South Korea also cooperate in the military sphere, including arms sales.

This cooperation increases Russian political influence on the Korean peninsula and, at the same time, strengthens Seoul’s position in dealing with Pyongyang.

CONCLUSION

Moscow maintains strong, albeit non–public relationship with North Korea. Russia’s soft power in North Korea derives, to a large extent, from the Soviet legacy. Its potential impact on peace negotiations should not be underestimated, as Putin’s diplomatic maneuvering and influence in the region may be crucial for any tangible outcome of peace talks. North Korea was one of a very few countries that recognized Russia’s annexation of Crimea. At the same time North Korea plays the Russian card to absorb the impact of China and to balance off the US, China and South Korea. Russia too, views South Korean investment in Russia’s eastern regions, as a way to mitigate the possibility of economic dependence on Chinese investment. Russia needs a peace settlement that will guarantee security, and denuclearization, opting for gradual economic integration between Russia’s Far East and the two Koreas.

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10) Heo, UKk, Roehrig, Terence – South Korea’s Rise. Economic Development, Power, and Foreign Relations, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p.67

11) Ibid, p.70

12) Anthony Rinna in National Interest, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/here-why-south-korea-may-be-turning-russia-24370?page=2>