

Russia's Role in the North Korea Conundrum: Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?



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Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il in Vladivostok, Russia in 2002.
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North Korea's nuclear test on Jan. 6, 2016 and long-range missile launch on Feb. 7 have highlighted the growing threat from the besieged totalitarian regime. There are various estimates on how far the DPRK has advanced in its WMD programs and, most importantly, whether it has mastered the technology of mounting nuclear warheads on ballistic missiles.^[1] Even if North Korea has not yet put together such a capability, it may achieve it within a few years, posing a direct threat to its neighbors in Northeast Asia and ultimately to the United States homeland.

In dealing with the North Korean challenge, two actors are widely considered pivotal – the United States and China. Beijing and Washington are no doubt the most influential players in Northeast Asia and with regard to

North Korea in particular. However, it would be wrong to overlook other stakeholders, particularly Russia. This paper argues that Russia, even though described by some as “the forgotten player”^[2] in the Korean drama, has both important interests on the Peninsula and capabilities to pursue them. The paper begins by briefly reviewing the history of Russia’s engagement with North Korea. It goes on to emphasize how Russia’s approach to Korean affairs has changed in recent years as a result of the Ukraine crisis and Moscow’s standoff with the West. The article explores how Russia’s growing deference to Chinese interests in East Asia may lead to Moscow closely aligning with Beijing on the Korean Peninsula issues. In conclusion, possible scenarios of Russian behavior toward North Korea are outlined.

Russia and North Korea: The Renaissance of an Old Alliance?

Ever since the second half of the nineteenth century, having acquired what is now the southern part of the Russian Far East, Russia has been a major stakeholder in Korean Peninsula affairs. Competition over Korea was one of the chief reasons why the Russian Empire and Japan went to war in 1904. After World War II, the Soviet Union was the crucial force behind the emergence of North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Since the division of the Korean Peninsula into two hostile political entities, Moscow had recognized the North as the only legitimate Korean state and maintained alliance with it while treating the South (the Republic of Korea, ROK) as only a “territory” and a US “puppet” rather than a sovereign state.

The final collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence in Moscow of Boris Yeltsin’s administration, which avowed principles of liberal democracy and saw Russia as a close partner of the West, dealt a huge blow to Russian-North Korean relations. In the first half of the 1990s, the newly democratic Russia essentially abandoned its longtime ally the DPRK and shifted priority to the ROK. Economic, political and military ties between Russia and the North dropped to almost zero. Moscow saw the DPRK as a totalitarian pariah state with no future. Many decision-makers in Moscow believed that North Korea was close to collapse and had nothing against the absorption of the DPRK by the ROK on South Korean terms. An additional factor in the Kremlin’s unfriendliness toward the DPRK was the fact that Pyongyang maintained active ties with the communist opposition to the Yeltsin regime.^[3]

Until the mid-1990s, Moscow’s policies on Korean Peninsula issues aligned with – or, to put it more accurately, followed – those of Seoul, Washington and Tokyo. This was due to several factors, such as Russia’s desire to act on the international stage in agreement with the West, its preoccupation with multiple domestic crises, and hopes to get material benefits from South Korea in the form of preferential loans, investments and technologies.

During the first North Korean nuclear crisis of 1993-1994 Russia mostly was a passive observer, effectively siding with the United States and even supporting the US threat of imposing UN sanctions against the DPRK.^[4] In 1995, Moscow formally notified Pyongyang that the alliance treaty of 1961 committing the USSR to the defense of the DPRK had become obsolete and needed to be replaced with another treaty not containing a mutual defense clause.^[5]

However, by the second half of the 1990s concerns were increasingly raised in Moscow that the heavy tilt toward Seoul at the expense of Pyongyang only served to undermine Russia’s positions in Northeast Asia without giving it any tangible benefits. Moscow was getting unhappy with fact that the four-party group, consisting of the DPRK, the ROK, the United States and China, was emerging as the main mechanism to deal with the Korean Peninsula issues – with Russia being left out. Moscow also felt that Seoul showed less interest in Russia after it had scaled down its ties with the North. Russia’s new foreign minister Evgeny Primakov, who in 1996 replaced the pro-Western Andrei Kozyrev, made efforts to correct the policy with the aim of mending relations with Pyongyang and raising Russia’s profile in Korean affairs. However, Moscow’s hand was still too weak to make any noticeable impact on the Peninsula’s strategic equation.

With Vladimir Putin’s coming to power in 2000 and Russia’s recovery from the chaos of the 1990s, Moscow had more resources – and more political will – to pursue pro-active and independent foreign policies. Besides, by the late 1990s the divergence of views on some key issues between Russia and the West became obvious. Russia now felt much less obliged to defer to the West -- and Seoul -- on Korean Peninsula questions. At the same

time, predictions of the imminent fall of the North Korean regime had proved to be wrong. It became clear to Moscow that the DPRK was not destined for an inevitable implosion and, indeed, could continue for quite a long time. Furthermore, with the economic situation in Russia rapidly improving, Moscow no longer needed South Korea's largesse, especially considering the disappointing fact that hopes for large South Korean investments had not materialized in the 1990s.

Moscow saw an opportunity to heighten Russia's international influence and prestige by reinserting itself into Korean Peninsula politics through restoring links with the DPRK. The Putin administration judged – correctly – that rebuilding ties with Pyongyang, while preserving good relations with Seoul, would again make Russia a player to be reckoned with in Northeast Asia. The new policy manifested itself in the highest level visits. Putin went to Pyongyang in 2000, becoming the first Russian leader to visit North Korea, while Kim Jong-il traveled to Russia in 2001, 2002 and 2011. In 2003 Russia also became the founding member of the Six Party Talks, reportedly at the insistence of Pyongyang, thus institutionalizing and legitimizing Moscow's role on the Korean Peninsula.

During that period Russia was careful to pursue equidistance – or equal closeness – in political relations with Seoul and Pyongyang. Recognizing the South's concerns about the North's development of nuclear and ballistic weapons and disapproving of Pyongyang's provocative statements and actions, Moscow simultaneously pointed to the need to safeguard the DPRK's "legitimate" security interests. Russia supported the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions punishing North Korea for its nuclear and ballistic missile program, but Moscow, along with Beijing, worked to take the edge off the sanctions and opposed harsher measures backed by the United States and Japan.^[6]

The Ukraine crisis, that started to unfold in 2013 and culminated in 2014, profoundly transformed Russia's foreign policy. The competition with the United States that hitherto had been tempered by a significant amount of bilateral engagement and cooperation turned into bitter enmity. This has had considerable repercussions for Russia's approaches to the Korean Peninsula, visible in the rapid improvement of Russia-North Korea ties.

During 2014 and 2015, Russian-North Korean relations have remarkably grown in intensity. There has been a flurry of high-level exchanges, with Russia becoming the country most frequently visited by North Korean senior officials. Since February 2014, the DPRK Supreme People's Assembly Presidium Chairman Kim Yong-nam, Minister of Foreign Trade Lee Ren-Nam, Foreign Minister Lee Soo-Young, Kim Jong-un's special envoy Choe Ryong Hae, Supreme People's Assembly Chairman Choi Thae Baek and other senior leaders traveled Russia.^[7] Russia reciprocated by sending to Pyongyang multiple delegations. Although the expected visit of the DPRK's supreme leader Kim Jong-un to Moscow for the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany did not materialize (Pyongyang was instead represented by Kim Yong-nam, the number two in the DPRK state hierarchy), this did not slow the momentum of Russia-North Korea ties, with 2015 designated as the Year of Friendship of Russia and the DPRK. In November 2015, Moscow and Pyongyang signed an agreement on "preventing dangerous military activity." The agreement, concluded at the level of the two countries' general staffs, was an indication of increased military contacts between Russia and the DPRK.^[8] In February 2016, Moscow and Pyongyang concluded an agreement on the transfer of illegal migrants, which will facilitate the deportation of North Korean defectors back to the DPRK.^[9] This sensitive document was signed just a few weeks after the North's nuclear test and a few days before the planned long-range missile launch, suggesting that, even under such inauspicious circumstances, Russia was keen to pursue political cooperation with the North Korean regime.

On the economic front, too, there have been a number of significant developments. The issue of North Korea's debt to Russia (inherited from the Soviet era) was finally settled in May 2014, with Russia agreeing to write off 90% of the \$11 billion debt. In order to promote bilateral commerce, the Russian-North Korean Business Council was set up, while North Korea agreed to relax visa regulations for Russian businesspeople and facilitate their work activities in the DPRK. Russia and the DPRK have made steps to use rubles in their commercial transactions.^[10] Apart from facilitating bilateral trade, the shift to rubles may help reduce North Korea's vulnerability to the US financial sanctions that target dollar-denominated transactions.^[11]

Tentative agreements on several large-scale projects have been reached. The biggest among them, named

“Pobeda” (“Victory”), calls for Russia to make substantial investments, to the tune of \$25 billion over 20 years, in North Korea’s mining industry and industrial infrastructure in exchange for gaining privileged access to the DPRK’s mineral wealth. Negotiations are underway to lease vast tracts of agricultural land in the RFE for North Koreans to cultivate.

These and other developments indicate that Russia-North Korea ties are now at their highest point since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both being ostracized by the West and subjected to sanctions, Russia and the DPRK now evidently feel more empathy with each other. In particular, North Korea expressed support for Russia over Crimea. In turn, Moscow defended the DPRK at the UNSC when it voted, along with China, against the inclusion of the issue of human rights in North Korea on the UNSC agenda.^[12] Moscow also probably wants to use its increased support for North Korea as additional leverage in the dealings with the West, Seoul and Tokyo, while North Korea needs Russia to reduce its extreme dependence on China.

Russia and China: Exchanging Korea for Ukraine?

Moscow has always stressed the need to seek “peaceful political and diplomatic solutions” to the North Korean issue. In effect, this means conservation of the existing geopolitical realities and preservation of the DPRK as a sovereign entity. Nonetheless, until recently Moscow’s commitment to Pyongyang was not without serious reservations. It seemed quite likely that Moscow would at some point judge that continuation of the erratic North Korean regime was not in its interests, leading to Russian acceptance of a swift Korean reunification, even if it should have been carried out as absorption of the North by South Korea.

Even if US troops were to be stationed in the northern part of the Peninsula after reunification, they would be of much more concern to China than Russia, if only because China shares a much longer border with North Korea (China’s frontier with North Korea is 1,416 kilometers long while Russia’s is only 19 kilometers). Unlike Beijing, the Kremlin did not worry much about the prospect of North Korea disappearing from the political map since Pyongyang served as a protective buffer for China rather than Russia.^[13]

One also had to consider the economic gains that Russia was well positioned to reap as a result of Korean reunification. Major projects that were stalled due to the inter-Korean conflict, such as a gas pipeline from Russia to Korea and the linking of Korean railways to the Russian Trans-Siberian Railway, would go ahead if the North Korean problem was finally resolved. More generally, North Korea is basically an economic wasteland, with very little commercial opportunities for the neighboring Russian Far East. To make things worse, the DPRK separates Russia from the powerhouse of the South Korean economy. Korean reunification would give the RFE direct access to a single market of 75 million people with high demand for Russian commodities.

Moscow was, and remains, unhappy with North Korea’s steady progress in the development of nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles both for reasons of principle, Russia being one of the guarantors of the NPT regime, and out of security concerns. Pyongyang’s nuclear aspirations pose immediate safety and security risks to the RFE and, in the longer term, could result in an arms race in Northeast Asia, a scenario extremely undesirable for Russia.

Russia’s preferred geopolitical vision for Northeast Asia has been one of rules-based multi-polar balance of power – a concert of powers in which Moscow would be one of the participants, with the Six Party Talks as a possible institutional prototype for such an arrangement. Prior to the Ukraine crisis, a unified Korea, with reduced security dependence on Washington and more clout vis-à-vis Beijing and Tokyo, was seen by many in Moscow as instrumental in establishing a power equilibrium in Northeast Asia that would be resistant to the dominance of any single actor, be it the United States or China. That constituted one more reason for Russia’s potential interest in Korean reunification.

Perhaps even a unified Korea that retained some form of security ties with the United States could have been acceptable to Moscow, as long as Russia’s relations with Washington were reasonably tolerable – just the way they stood in the 2000s. This contrasted with China’s stance: Beijing obviously preferred to keep Korea divided rather than seeing a united, strong and possibly pro-US country on China’s borders, unless, of course, a unified Korea recognized itself as part of the Chinese strategic sphere of influence, a very unlikely prospect.

Russia's mounting conflict with the West that culminated in the Ukraine crisis changed Moscow's calculus. First, the Ukraine mess has distracted Russia's attention and resources from East Asia, including the Korean Peninsula. Second, emotional anti-Americanism has permeated Russian foreign policy, making Washington's enemies Moscow's friends and poisoning Russia's relations with US allies like South Korea and Japan. Third, and perhaps most important, Russia's growing reliance on China is making Russia more receptive to Beijing's interests in the Asia-Pacific.

To be sure, the Asia-Pacific, and especially the Korean Peninsula, is important to Moscow in many respects but its significance cannot be compared to Russian stakes in Ukraine and other post-Soviet regions – the places Russia is literally prepared to fight for. At the same time, China has fundamental interests in the Korean Peninsula and views Eastern Europe as a peripheral concern. This makes possible, and logical, a sort of geopolitical deal-making between Moscow and Beijing, with Russia showing deference to Beijing in East Asian affairs in return for China's tacit support, or at least benevolent neutrality, in the Kremlin's confrontation with the US-led West over Ukraine.

One indication of Russia's growing strategic collaboration with China on the Peninsula issue has been the two countries' joint opposition to the THAAD missile defense system's prospective deployment in South Korea. In April 2015, Russia and China held the first round of the bilateral dialogue on security in Northeast Asia in which the THAAD issue was one of the main agenda items.^[14]

It may be expected that Moscow and Beijing will increasingly coordinate their positions on security issues in Northeast Asia and the Peninsula, including the provision of diplomatic cover for the North Korean regime. This will resurrect a Cold War-era division of Northeast Asia into the US-Japan-ROK trio versus the China-Russia-DPRK axis.^[15]

The true importance of Sino-Russian collaboration on the Peninsula may be revealed in case of a North Korean implosion. Although the collapse of the DPRK's current regime is by no means imminent, the situation in the North is basically unpredictable. The regime may continue for another fifty years, but it is almost as likely that it will start falling apart tomorrow. The two players that would have the highest stakes in the event of a North Korean implosion are obviously the ROK and China. They will seek to control the process of the regime's collapse and shape its outcome in order to secure their own interests in the northern part of the Peninsula.

Even though China admittedly has a substantial leverage over North Korea, it may need Russian backing, if and when the DPRK begins to crumble. Apart from China and the ROK, Russia is the only country neighboring North Korea. Moreover, unlike the DMZ, Russia's border with the North is not heavily militarized. This could make it easier for Russia to intervene, jointly with China, in the DPRK. Russia's rich experience in carrying out military and hybrid warfare operations in recent years – from Chechnya to Crimea – will certainly be an extra asset for China that has not tested its armed force since 1979 (when it launched an offensive against Vietnam). Putin's bold intervention in Syria underscored Russia's increased willingness – and capacity – to undertake military gambles in foreign countries. Last but not least, Russia's diplomatic support as a major power and permanent UNSC member will give more international legitimacy to the intervention, allowing Beijing to avoid isolation.

Swift coordinated actions by China and Russia will guarantee that the outcome of a North Korean contingency will be in accordance with their geopolitical interests. Beijing would aim for the stabilization of the North and installment of a new regime loyal to China while preventing the absorption of the DPRK by the US-allied South. Russia will back Beijing's game, especially if China allows Moscow to retain some degree of influence over North Korea. If China and Russia act in lockstep in a North Korean crisis, Seoul's chances to achieve reunification with the North on its own terms are reduced to near zero.

What is Russia's Leverage with North Korea?

The conventional view is that Russia's influence over North Korea is mostly political, predicated on Russia's permanent membership in the UNSC and participation in the Six Party Talks. Often overlooked is the fact that Russia maintains a range of commercial and other links with the DPRK. Taken together, they constitute quite a substantial leverage that Russia can exercise over North Korea, when and if it chooses to do so. Arguably,

among North Korea's neighbors Russia now ranks second, after China, in terms of its potential capability to cause intense economic pain to the North Korean regime. This became especially true in recent years after Japan and South Korea discontinued virtually all economic contacts with the DPRK.

Trade. In 2014, Russia's trade with North Korea totaled \$92 million, with Russian exports accounting for 90% of the turnover. Russia ranks as the DPRK's third biggest partner in terms of imports. This, to a large extent, reflects the reality that North Korea has to offer mostly raw materials, like coal and iron ore, that Russia itself has in abundance.

The top items that Russia sells to the North are oil and fuel, transport vehicles, and grain. Moreover, according to minister for the development of the Far East Alexander Galushka, about one third of China's exports to North Korea (roughly \$900 mln) is actually made up of Russian-originated goods.^[16] He did not specify which Russian goods China re-exports to North Korea, but this is most likely oil. Galushka suggested that the involvement of "third countries" in Russia-North Korea commerce should be minimized in order to reduce the prices and raise the quality of the traded merchandise.

North Korean labor. The imbalance in trade in goods, in which Russia has an overwhelming surplus, is partly compensated by the export of North Korean labor to Russia. Sending labor overseas is an important source of hard currency for the North Korean regime. The North Korean government takes at least 50 percent of what its workers earn in foreign countries.

North Korean guest workers first came to the Russian (then – Soviet) Far East in the late 1940s under inter-governmental agreements. There has long been a natural complementarity between the RFE's constant shortage of manpower and North Korea's surplus labor. Varying from year to year, there are approximately 20-26 thousand North Korean migrants in Russia, most of them contract guest laborers. According to some estimates, Russia is the world's biggest recipient of North Korean contract labor.^[17] Labor migrants from the DPRK are mostly males, involved in construction, agriculture and timbering.

Most North Korean workers enter Russia under a contract with a Russian company, which acts as their formal employer. However, they often end up on the free job market. For example, in Vladivostok most of North Koreans find jobs in construction, renovating apartments and houses etc. They are organized in teams led by "captains." The captains are persons who have lived in Russia for a relatively long time, can speak Russian and are familiar with the local market. Teams are responsible for finding their employment. In fact, they act as free market agents – looking for jobs and offering their services, which they often advertise in local mass media.^[18] In Vladivostok, North Korean construction and renovation teams are highly competitive, offering a very attractive price-quality tradeoff. One can often see large groups of North Koreans in the Vladivostok airport boarding Air Koryo flights back to Pyongyang. Most of them carry a lot of baggage, indicating that they bring commercial stuff from Russia to be resold in North Korea, thus acting as another informal conduit for Russian-North Korean trade.

The North Korean migrants are considered law-abiding and do not give much trouble to the authorities in the RFE. Back in the 1990s, there were several cases of North Koreans engaged in currency counterfeiting and drugs trafficking, but this problem does not exist any more.^[19]

One peculiar fixture of North Korea's presence in Russia is its restaurants. There are North Korean restaurants in Vladivostok, Khabarovsk and Moscow. They are part North Korea's global network of state-run restaurants, not only earning money for the government in Pyongyang but also apparently serving as sites of intelligence operations.^[20]

Investment. The bulk of Russia's direct investment in North Korea is related to the Khasan-Rajin project. The state-owned Russian Railways spent roughly \$300 mln on the upgrade of the 54-kilometer cross-border railway link from Russia's Khasan to the North Korean port of Rajin. This was accompanied with the modernization of the Rajin port facilities, where Russia was granted a long-term lease of one of the piers. To implement the project, a joint venture, *Rasonkontrans*, was established, with Russia holding 70% of the shares and North Korea 30%. Apart from the South Korean-funded Kaesong industrial complex, the Khasan-Rajin venture may well be the largest single foreign investment in North Korea. The upgraded railway, which became operational in 2013, allows the use of the port of Rajin for transshipment of cargos coming via the Trans-Siberian from Russia

bound for Asia-Pacific countries. So far the cargos coming via the Khasan-Rajin route have mainly been destined for China. In 2014-2015, there were three successful shipments of Siberian coal via Rajin to South Korea's Pohang, raising hopes that the route can be eventually used as another inter-Korean business project. Russia views the Khasan-Rajin project as the first stage of the grand design to link up the Russian Trans-Siberian mainline with the prospective Trans-Korean Railway.

Finance. Russia is one of the few countries whose financial institutions carry out regular transactions with North Korea. These are mostly private banks located in the RFE. Tellingly, in 2007 the RFE's Khabarovsk-based *Dalcombank* became the only bank in the world that agreed to perform a delicate mission of mediating the transfer to North Korea of \$25 mln of the Kim regime's assets that had been previously frozen in Macao-based *Banco Delta Asia* by the US financial sanctions.[21]

Fishing. Russia's exclusive economic zone is an important source of fish catches for North Korea. North Korean fishing boats, mostly catching squid, operate in Russian waters in accordance with intergovernmental agreements between Russia and the DPRK that regulate the species and the amount allowed for catch. Apart from legal fishing, there have been repeated incidents of North Korean poaching in Russia's seas, even though Russian authorities are generally reluctant to make them public.

Aircraft. North Korean national flag carrier *Air Koryo's* fleet entirely consists of Russian-made aircraft – Tupolevs, Ilyushins, and Antonovs. This means dependence on spare parts and some maintenance services imported from Russia. The DPRK's air force also operates a large number of Soviet- and Russian-made jets, though most of them are grounded due to shortages of fuel and poor maintenance.

Transportation links. With the exception of China, Russia is the only country that maintains overland transportation communications with the DPRK. Russia and North Korea are connected by a railway bridge across Tumangan (Tumannaya) River. In addition to the existing railway link, the two sides recently decided to build an automobile bridge, although it is unclear when the construction will actually begin.[22] Russia's Vladivostok is among the handful of airports that have permanent scheduled air service to Pyongyang[23] (all the other airports with scheduled year-round service to North Korea are China's Beijing, Shenyang and Shanghai).[24] Regular overland and air links make Russia an indispensable gateway for North Korea. If Russia curtails or terminates the functioning of these routes, North Korea will only have to rely on Chinese options.

Education. Russia is one of the very few countries where North Korea sends its students, even though their number is relatively limited. At Russian universities, they mostly major in Russian language studies, engineering, and sciences.

Conclusion: Three Scenarios

Given its long-standing interests on the Korean Peninsula and its substantial leverage, Russia is going to play an active role in the ongoing drama centered on North Korea. The question is what kind of a role it will be. Most likely, Russia's behavior will gravitate to one of the following scenarios:

Scenario 1. Russia obstructs international efforts to deal with North Korea. This scenario is likely if Russia's relations with the United States become even worse than they stand now, with the two countries entering a new edition of a bitter Cold War. In order to punish the West, rather than joining in the US-led efforts to reign in the Kim regime, Moscow will extend Pyongyang a lifeline that alleviates international pressure.[25] *In extremis*, Russia can even resume weapons deliveries to the DPRK, something that Pyongyang has long been seeking from Moscow.

Some elements of this scenario, albeit in less extreme varieties, can also materialize if Russia feels that it is being sidelined or ignored as a major player on the Korean Peninsula. Consider Russia's reluctance to give immediate consent to the UNSC draft resolution imposing stiff sanctions on North Korea that was negotiated bilaterally by the US and China in late February 2016. Moscow expressed its displeasure over the fact that Russia's interests were not taken into account and delayed the adoption of the resolution.[26] Russia secured an important concession in the final version of the resolution adopted by the UNSC on March 2, whereby coal

originating outside the DPRK (from Russia and Mongolia) and transported for export through the North's port of Rajin is exempt from the general coal trade ban.^[27] This will ensure continued operation of the Russian-controlled Khasan-Rajin rail link venture.

Scenario 2. Russia plays second fiddle to China. Given its emerging quasi-alliance with Beijing, Moscow may defer to Chinese interests with regard to North Korea in exchange for China's acknowledgment of Russia's vital interests in Ukraine and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space. That means that Russia will largely follow China's line on the Korean Peninsula.

If China adopts a harsh stance on North Korea, as appears to be the case in light of the latest UNSC sanctions resolution, then Russia will join the sanctions regime too. Yet, it is by no means certain that China is really committed to enforcing the sanctions. Beijing was essentially coerced by Washington into supporting the severe penalties against the DPRK. To extract China's consent, the US employed the threat of "secondary sanctions" against Chinese entities doing business with North Korea as well as the prospect of deploying THAAD missile defense system to South Korea which Beijing claims can compromise China's security. In short, it is a big question if China will faithfully honor the sanctions deal that it had to sign up to under intense pressure from its main strategic rival. And, as many observers note, China's record on complying with the previous rounds of UN sanctions against North Korea has been less than convincing.^[28] Thus, if China pretends it goes along with the new sanctions, but in fact it does not, Russia will display a similar behavior. UNSC Resolution 2270 gives plenty of discretionary space for loosening the grip of sanctions, for example, containing language that allows transactions with the DPRK if they are done for "humanitarian" or "livelihood" purposes.^[29]

As discussed above, the most potent corollary of the China-Russia collaboration with regard to the Korean Peninsula could be their joint intervention in case of the Kim regime's probable collapse. Russia's participation in such an intervention may not be far-fetched now that Moscow has demonstrated, with Crimea and Syria, its appetite for bold military moves abroad.

Scenario 3. Russia acts as a constructive and independent player. Moscow no doubt continues to attach high priority to maintaining peace on the Korean Peninsula as well as safeguarding the global non-proliferation regime. That is why there exists a strong possibility that Russia would be willing to make significant contributions to international efforts to contain North Korea, making use of political and economic leverage it wields with Pyongyang, even though Russia will still be unlikely to support extremely tough sanctions that could result in the Pyongyang regime's collapse.

Russia will act as an independent player which collaborates with Washington, Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul as long as their goals align with Moscow's – namely, preventing war on the Peninsula and protecting non-proliferation regime. With regard to non-proliferation, Russia will be content if North Korea freezes its nuclear and missile programs, viewing complete denuclearization as a long-term goal. The Six Party Talks remain Russia's preferred diplomatic format for dealing with North Korea.

Even though Russia's and the US's interests on the Korean affairs are not identical, they overlap enough to warrant their close cooperation. As the State Department representative for North Korea policy Sung Kim put it in January 2015, "alignment [of the US and Russia] on the core goal of de-nuclearization remains as strong as ever." He went on to state that "Russia will remain an important player in our diplomacy with the DPRK."^[30] That said, Moscow's willingness to cooperate with the United States on the Korean Peninsula issues will be directly linked to the general condition of Russian-US relations: if they remain tense, or become even more contentious, Russia would be tempted to obstruct Washington's Korea policies.

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- [17] Marcus Noland, "North Korean Exports of Labor," Dec. 15, 2014, <http://blogs.piie.com/nk/?p=13692>
- [18] This relative "freedom" does not apply to the North Koreans who toil in logging camps in Amur Oblast and Khabarovsk Krai of the RFE. Due to their remoteness and isolation, very little is known about the conditions in these camps.
- [19] Author conversations with law enforcement officials in Vladivostok, Feb. 2016.
- [20] Bill Gertz, "North Korea's Overseas Restaurants Used for Espionage and Gaining Hard Currency," October

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[21] “Dalcombank transfers Macao funds to N. Korea,” RIA Novosti, June 25, 2007, <http://sputniknews.com/world/20070625/67734563.html>

[22] “A floating automobile bridge will be built between Russia and the DPRK,” Gudok.ru, Oct. 20, 2015, <http://www.gudok.ru/infrastructure/?ID=1311879> (in Russian)

[23] Currently there are two flights per week between Vladivostok and Pyongyang operated by Air Koryo.

[24] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_Koryo_destinations#cite_note-korea-dpr.com-1

[25] Van Jackson, “Putin and the Hermit Kingdom,” *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 22, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2015-02-22/putin-and-hermit-kingdom> . See also Richard Weitz, “Russian Policy toward North Korea: Steadfast and Changing,” *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*. Vol. 24, No. 3, 2015, p. 25.

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[27] UNSC Resolution 2270. Adopted on 2 March, 2016, <http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/2016.shtml>

[28] Emily Rauhala, “China, U.S. cite progress on N. Korea sanctions deal. But there’s no quick fix,” *The Washington Post*, Feb. 24, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-us-cite-progress-on-n-korea-sanctions-deal-but-theres-no-quick-fix/2016/02/24/66bc7081-68db-4612-a9b6-f75bbf73ae82_story.html

[29] UNSC Resolution 2270. Adopted on 2 March, 2016, <http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/2016.shtml>

[30] State Department Representative for North Korea Policy, Sung Kim, Testimony Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Washington, DC, January 13, 2015, <http://translations.state.gov/st/english/texttrans/2015/01/20150113312954.html#axzz3aYM7JEsc>.