

Is the Northern Alliance Making a Comeback? Do Russia, China and North Korea Constitute An Alliance?

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In light of a second Kim–Trump summit this article reviews the posture of Russia and China and suggests that not only do they have an alliance but that it also includes to some degree North Korea. Moscow and Beijing have endorsed Pyongyang’s negotiating posture and much evidence suggests a Russo–Chinese alliance, albeit an informal one. Such an alliance possesses immense implications for the ongoing efforts to find a negotiated path out of the Korean nuclearization crisis and for regional security in general. But in the meantime the advent of such an alliance imparts a quality of regional bipolarity to the Northeast Asian security agenda that could obstruct further progress towards peace.

Keywords: Russia, China, North Korea, alliance, denuclearization

Introduction

The announcement of a second Trump–Kim summit in February 2019 provides an excellent opportunity to review Korean issues from the standpoint of regional security rather than primarily as a proliferation question. Whereas the United States continues to stress the priority of denuclearization; it would arguably benefit Washington and add to the likelihood of successfully resolving Korean issues to view Korean issues primarily in the context of Northeast Asia’s regional security.¹ Because Russia and China view this issue from the standpoint of regional and international security; rethinking Russo–Chinese ties to North Korea offers valuable pointers in the quest for a lasting peace on the Korean peninsula, especially as Russia and China have become allies.² As Bonnie Glazer observes, “The Chinese have always looked at North Korea through the lens of their competition with the United States, so they want to make sure their interests are protected.”³ South Korean diplomats similarly comment that in their private

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conversations Chinese diplomats focus on the United States.⁴ At the same time Russia too views Korea through the perspectives of regional security and its relationship with Washington.⁵

Alliance and Bipolarity

According to Sergei Radchenko, writing in 2015,

The argument for the China–Russia–DPRK triangle in Northeast Asia hinges on the idea that the three countries are willing to coordinate their actions on the international stage, adopt similar positions on key regional questions, and develop trilateral cooperation in economic or military spheres.⁶

At that time Radchenko denied that these powers were or could be allies.⁷ However, this paper argues that an alliance meeting those criteria has emerged even if it is not nearly as formal as the U.S. alliance system in Asia or other, earlier examples. Although most analysts still argue that despite growing intimacy Russia and China are not allies; some do argue for a Sino–Russian alliance.⁸ Artem Lukin, Rens Lee, Gilbert Rozman, and Alexander Korolev all believe the evidence clearly shows an evolving alliance dominated by China along with bilateral ideological or normative and strategic congruence.⁹ Actually the reality of this relationship supersedes whatever label is attached to it. Dmitri Trenin, Director of the Moscow Office of the Carnegie Endowment, admits China gets most, if not all, that it wants from Russia without a formal alliance.¹⁰

Moscow and Beijing readily proclaim that they coordinate their actions on the global stage. And their observations about this relationship strongly demonstrate that it is *de facto* an alliance, albeit an informal one. Recently a joint Russo–Chinese expert dialogue argued that the parties have attained a level of interaction higher than a strategic partnership and even better than an alliance. Both sides retain full freedom in relations with third countries “except in circumstances where such relations might violate certain obligations of the existing partnership” (a critical caveat when it comes to Korean issues). Meanwhile in the bilateral relationship’s intensiveness, level of trust, depth, and effectiveness Sino–Russian ties supposedly are superior to an alliance.¹¹ Furthermore this partnership supposedly has more potential to act “as an independent geopolitical power and deter political adversaries.” Finally both parties have successfully adapted their cooperation “to resolve any global or regional task” while preserving their swift decision-making, tactical flexibility, and strategic stability.¹²

In Korea alliance behavior and dynamics, as defined by Radchenko, are clearly occurring. Apart from the general Sino–Russian normative consensus the causes for this alliance in regard to Korea are shared strategic political and military perspectives. For example, a 2017 report by Russian and Chinese experts openly stated that, although Moscow’s strategic nuclear forces are outside the range of the U.S. THAAD (Terminal

High-Altitude Air Defense) missiles placed in South Korea at Seoul's request, both governments viewed this deployment as a sign of a "changing strategic balance of power in this region" and as a clear threat to China and implicitly to Russia not just North Korea.¹³ Moreover, Russia continues to identify with China's approach that blames the United States, seeks mitigating excuses for North Korean behavior, and justifies that behavior by invoking U.S. threats.¹⁴

Finally both Russia and China have overtly announced their support for North Korea's negotiating position of phased, synchronous concessions by both sides.

Moreover, on October 9, 2018, following the latest visit of U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to North Korea, deputy foreign ministers of Russia, China, and North Korea—Igor Morgulov of Russia, Kong Xuanyou of China, and Choe Son Hui of North Korea—gathered for the first time in Moscow to discuss easing sanctions on North Korea. Summarizing the meetings, Morgulov, stated in a *TASS* interview that "measures" should reflect "reciprocity, and parallel, synchronous and gradual steps" and emphasized that the situation on the Korean Peninsula would be settled in "accordance with the Russian–Chinese roadmap."¹⁵

Since then President Xi Jinping has stated that, "the legitimate issues raised by the DPRK are rightful demands and that he fully agrees that the DPRK's reasonable interests should be justly resolved."¹⁶ Consequently, if China is encouraging North Korea to resist U.S. pressure for denuclearization as President Trump has suggested, Russia is also likely doing so and probably at China's behest.¹⁷ Certainly, both states are transparently violating UN resolutions that they previously supported regarding sanctions on North Korea.¹⁸ In fact there is evidence that in 2017–18 despite new UN sanctions on North Korea that China had supported, it increased covert economic aid for "daily life and infrastructure building" as well as "defensive military construction" and "high level military science and technology" to Korea. The weaponry cited here included "more advanced mid-and short-range ballistic missiles, cluster munitions, etc."¹⁹ Increasingly, Russian analyses of the Korean issue follow China in blaming Washington for the DPRK's continuing nuclearization due to U.S. threats against North Korea.²⁰ Therefore Russia and China argue, much to Pyongyang's delight, that Washington must initiate concessions, e.g. formally ending the Korean War, giving security guarantees, and ceasing its threats while deferring the urgent necessity of denuclearization.²¹ Moscow also showed visible pleasure that the outcome of the Singapore summit in 2018 apparently corresponded to it and Beijing's proposal (largely a Chinese initiative) of a so called double freeze or roadmap: North Korea freezing nuclear tests in return for a freeze on U.S.–ROK exercises.²²

Consequently these three parties' behavior and their interactive dynamics raise the issues of whether the Northern Alliance and ensuing bipolarity that characterized the Cold War are also returning to Northeast Asia albeit in an altered and looser form. Given the current state of Sino–American and Russo–American relations one might be forgiven for believing that bipolarity reminiscent of the Cold War had returned to Asia. But actually there are those who years ago warned of a drift towards strategic bipolarity

in Northeast Asia with the U.S. alliance system confronting a reconstituted version of the Cold War alliance of Russia, China and the DPRK. South Korean columnist, Kim Yo'ng Hu'i, wrote in 2005,

China and Russia are reviving their past strategic partnership to face their strongest rival, the United States. A structure of strategic competition and confrontation between the United States and India on the one side, and Russia and China on the other is unfolding in the eastern half of the Eurasian continent including the Korean peninsula. Such a situation will definitely bring a huge wave of shock to the Korean peninsula, directly dealing with the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces in Korea. If China and Russia train their military forces together in the sea off the coast of China's Liaodong Peninsula, it will also have an effect on the 21st century strategic plan of Korea. We will now need to think of Northeast Asia on a much broader scale. The eastern half of Eurasia, including Central Asia, has to be included in our strategic plan for the future.²³

Subsequently Lyle Goldstein and Vitaly Kozyrev warned that, "From the standpoint of global politics, the formation of a Sino-Russian energy nexus would represent a strong consolidation of an emergent bipolar structure in East Asia, with one pole led by China (and including Russia) and one led by the United States (and including Japan)."²⁴

Likewise, this author observed in 2011 that the repeated references in Sino-Russian meetings of convergent policy lines pointed to an identity of interests between them.²⁵ Since then Chinese President Xi Jinping's invitation to Russia to work more closely together with China on Asian security and stability issues suggest what could have led Pyongyang to see a common anti-Americanism in their positions.²⁶ Furthermore Russian analysts, no doubt emulating official positions, argue that there are no concessions Washington could make under any circumstances that would induce North Korea to denuclearize. Therefore the DPRK should retain at least some nuclear weapons for several years to come, a sure way to torpedo the current negotiations.²⁷ Moreover, as long as Russian and Chinese leaders and analysts blame Washington first, North Korea will perceive the reappearance of this Cold War "northern alliance" that allows it to defy the UN and the United States.

The Alliance in Practice

This author has already previously argued the case for a Sino-Russia alliance dominated by China.²⁸ Despite Putin and Xi Jinping's strictures against alliances Russia has frequently solicited China for a formal alliance.²⁹ China's practical response to such solicitation conforms to alliance dynamics even if it formally eschews alliances. China's Defense Minister travelled to Moscow in 2018 to state openly that China supports Russia.³⁰ Moreover, the actual evidence shows all the signs of an alliance. In 2014, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov remarked on the emergence of a new type of alliance, "not in the sense of tough bloc discipline when NATO was against the Warsaw Pact...

but [of] flexible network alliances.”³¹ This alliance need not be formally codified, but can remain a flexible alignment with room for separate, parallel, or convergent initiatives and even occasional disagreements.³²

Since 2014, Moscow has overtly sought such an alliance. In October 2014, Putin described Russia and China as natural allies.³³ In November 2014, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu contended in Beijing that both countries not only faced U.S. threats in the Asia–Pacific but also U.S.–orchestrated “color revolutions” and Islamic terrorism. He advocated enhanced cooperation in response, both bilaterally and within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.³⁴ Shoigu identified “good-neighborly relations” with China as key “to ensuring peace throughout the Eurasian continent and beyond.”³⁵ This gambit reversed previous Russian policy, which had sought to exclude the PLA from Central Asia and claim sole rights of military intervention there. Neither was it the only example where Russia solicited an alliance with China. Putin in 2016 noted that:

As we had never reached this level of relations before, our experts have had trouble defining today’s general state of our common affairs. It turns out that to say we have strategic cooperation is not enough anymore. This is why we have started talking about a comprehensive partnership and strategic collaboration. “Comprehensive” means that we work virtually on all major avenues; “strategic” means that we attach enormous intergovernmental importance to this work.³⁶

And the relationship has only deepened since then.

Vasily Kashin, Senior Research Fellow at the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of the Far East, claims that the 2001 Russo–Chinese treaty enshrined at the very least strategic military and political coordination between both governments. Specifically, he observes that,

Chapter 9 of the treaty stipulated that “in case there emerges a situation which, by [the] opinion of one of the Participants, can create threats to the peace, violate the peace, or affect the interests of the security of the Participant, and also in case when there is a threat of aggression against one of the Participants, the Participants immediately contact each other and start consultations in order to remove the emerging threat.”³⁷

Kashin further notes that, “While the treaty did not create any obligations for mutual defense, it clearly required both sides to consider some sort of joint action in the case of a threat from a third party.”³⁸

This is too close to advocacy of an alliance to be coincidental. But the alliance Moscow seeks need not be formally codified like NATO or pre-World War I alliances. Instead it can remain a *de facto* flexible alignment with room for separate, parallel, or convergent, initiatives or even occasional disagreements corresponding to both sides’ views on the contemporary world order.³⁹ This conforms to Kashin, Putin, Lavrov, and the Russo–Chinese experts’ observations cited above on the bilateral relationship’s tendencies.⁴⁰ Michael Yahuda also observes that Russian elites very much favor

enhanced collaboration.

Moscow believes that bolstering China's military position in East Asia is very much in Russian interests. As the official in charge of Russian arms exports stated in April 2015, "if we work in China's interests, that means we also work in our interests." In other words, the U.S.-led economic sanctions on Russia have made Sino-Russian strategic interests more congruent.⁴¹

Shoigu subsequently remarked that,

"Russia's strategic partner is the People's Republic of China. Bilateral military cooperation is developing actively. Primarily it is focused on the fight against international terrorism. Joint actions are regularly practiced during the military exercises Naval interaction and Peaceful Mission. The Russian Federation continues to prepare specialists for the People's Liberation Army of China. In total more than 3,600 Chinese servicemen have been trained in the universities of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation."⁴²

And enhanced military cooperation is visible in the joint exercises since 2014 culminating in Vostok 2018 and mutual arms sales to each other. In addition, both governments jointly conducted a series of experiments in the atmosphere that not only could alter earthly environments but also apparently disturb electrical connections in the territories below these experiments.⁴³ Thus these experiments look suspiciously like preliminary efforts to test both ground-based and space-based capabilities to achieve the effects of an EMP (Electro-Magnetic Pulse) attack on earth against their adversaries. Indeed, commenting on these tests, the Chinese journal *Earth and Planetary Physics* observed that the results were satisfactory but also "such international cooperation is very rare for China."⁴⁴ Similarly, the Vostok-2018 exercises involving large-scale Russian forces and about 3,200 Chinese forces in September 2018 may have originally been intended as an exercise in anticipation of a U.S. attack on North Korea.⁴⁵

This bilateral solution meets China and Russia's refusal to join formal alliances and Chinese leaders' repeated calls upon Moscow to forge ever closer ties and cooperation regarding Asian and international security, support China's vital national interests, and even build a new world order based on "global strategic stability."⁴⁶ It also allows Putin (and Xi Jinping) to pretend that there is not an alliance and that Russia is expanding its ties in Asia even as its dependency upon China steadily grows. Yet "Russia and China stick to points of view which are very close to each other or are almost the same in the international arena," Putin said, in 2016.⁴⁷ Lastly it is notable that much of this talk of alliance originated on Russia's i.e. the demandeur's side, and revolves around military and ideological-political cooperation and congruent world-views as well as a shared enemy, i.e. American power and liberalism. We should also remember that although Russia and China sometimes find cooperation difficult, their commitment to emphasizing the positives in the relationship, rather than belaboring their differences overrides those disputes. The steady institutionalization of bilateral ties has facilitated this approach.

This process encompasses summits between heads of state, regular meetings of prime ministers and foreign ministers, consultations on strategic stability (at the level of deputy foreign ministers), military cooperation (at the level of defense ministers), and broader security issues (between national security advisors).⁴⁸

Neither should we seek refuge in the illusion that Moscow cannot abide China's visible dominance in the relationship. The comforting belief held by many in Washington concerning Russia and China's "natural non-convergence of interest" is simply not true.⁴⁹ China's ambassador to Russia, Li Hui, states that, "China and Russia are together now like lips and teeth," a formulation that clearly evokes an alliance relationship. And even Vladimir Putin accepts China's leadership, having said that, "the main struggle, which is now underway, is that for global leadership and we are not going to contest China on this."⁵⁰ Indeed, Graham Allison observes that,

What has emerged is what a former senior Russian national security official described to me as a "functional military alliance." Russian and Chinese General Staffs now have candid, detailed discussions about the threat U.S. nuclear modernization and missile defenses pose to each of their strategic deterrents.⁵¹

It therefore stands to reason that these militaries also have had for some time equally probing discussions on issues of conventional warfare and Korean issues.⁵² And beyond the evidence presented here, the evidence from Sino-Russian joint exercises and arms sales carries its own warning.

Allison's observations also reinforce the notion that beyond the visible bilateral normative convergence concerning international affairs, in Korea's case we also see a shared strategic consensus. For example, there are reasons to believe that in its original planning the Vostok-2018 exercise in Russia that also involved Chinese forces reflected apprehension about a U.S. strike on North Korea that could easily oblige them to respond.⁵³ Certainly the joint air and missile defenses exercises of 2017 suggests an alliance and apprehension about just this contingency given shared anxieties about an apparent drift to war in Korea then. The reason is that in such exercises both sides must put their cards on the table and display their C4ISR.⁵⁴ As Kashin notes, this exercise took the form of a computer simulation where both sides constructed a joint air/missile defense area using long-range SAM systems like the Chinese HQ-9 and the Russian S-300/400 series.⁵⁵

Neither did Russo-Chinese anxieties about the military situation around Korea begin as a result of President Trump's belligerent policies in 2017. The earlier placement in South Korea of the THAAD missile defense system (Terminal High Altitude Air Defense) to defend the ROK against North Korean threats not only generated a Chinese trade and economic war against South Korea, it also brought Moscow and Beijing closer together militarily. Even though this system does not threaten Russia's strategic nuclear forces, Russian officials are now attacking U.S. policies, e.g. projected space defenses, as posing a threat to China.⁵⁶ The Russo-Chinese report of experts' dialogues in 2017 also stated that both sides viewed this system in unequivocally negative terms. Not only

does it threaten Chinese strategic forces, it also allegedly changes the strategic balance of power in Northeast Asia and from the Russian side generates fears of arms proliferation, namely that the United States and its Asian allies will be able to threaten the Russian Far East and Siberia.⁵⁷ The newly released U.S. Missile Defense Review may also add to their perception of being at risk.⁵⁸

Thus normative and domestic political forces as well as their perception of U.S. conduct globally have helped forge an alliance that is based on their shared self-representation abroad as well as upon their normative and strategic consensus.⁵⁹ Adding to the factors driving the alliance are the facts that Russia's failure to launch let alone execute major reforms relegates it to a steadily declining and increasingly dependent position *vis-à-vis* China both economically, and possibly by the next decade militarily. Indeed, Russia is already buying Chinese weapons!⁶⁰ In addition, as virtually everyone studying this relationship admits, since Russia invaded and then annexed Crimea in 2014 its dependence on Chinese economic and political support to sustain its great power standing and capability has steadily grown. Indeed, an extreme assessment might even argue that Russia continues its global great power offensives on Chinese sufferance and would be in a very difficult position if China "pulled the plug" on that support. At the same time Russian aggressiveness abroad may also represent Moscow's way of displaying its "bona fides" as a great power to Beijing. That need for Chinese support and consequent support for Chinese policy positions is discernible in its being obliged to allow Chinese equity ownership in Arctic and energy projects, its acknowledgement of Chinese economic superiority in Central Asia, allow China equity ownership in Russian Arctic and energy projects, the modulation of Russia's position regarding the South China Sea, and overt support for China's leading role regarding Korea.⁶¹

The Alliance and Korean Regional Dynamics

Given their normative and military-economic-political consensus we should not be surprised that the these two governments' shared understanding of regional dynamics in critical Asian theaters like Korea has also been instrumental in driving them to forge an alliance in support of the DPRK. As noted above, Russian and Chinese commentators agree that the current status quo, no new nuclear tests and no new U.S.-ROK exercises, fulfills what they believe is their original idea of a so called "double freeze" proposed in 2017.⁶² Russian diplomats announced after meetings with DPRK diplomats in late 2018 their support for North Korea's insistence on "phased, synchronous" concessions," which means declaring an end to the war and making concessions on a peace treaty before any concessions on denuclearization.⁶³ Similarly President Putin, like President Xi Jinping, has announced his opposition to sanctions and Xi Jinping has announced his intention to visit North Korea in 2019.⁶⁴ Thus Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang appear to be aligned together if not allies behind the DPRK's negotiating platform as we have seen above. Summarizing the meeting among the three states' foreign ministry officials, Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov told *TASS* that "measures" should

reflect “reciprocity, and parallel, synchronous and gradual steps” and emphasized that the situation on the Korean Peninsula would be settled in “accordance with the Russian–Chinese roadmap.⁶⁵ Or, in other words, we are arguably seeing a pale revival of the erstwhile “northern alliance” of the Cold War and the ensuing bipolarity of that time in regard to Korea.⁶⁶

As of 2019 this alliance is coordinating with North Korea on the key issues of the agenda in its bilateral negotiations with Washington. Beyond taking credit for the “double freeze” option Russian analysts and officials also readily highlight Sino–Russian cooperation on Korea even as they acknowledge China as being the leading player on Korea.⁶⁷ In this respect they take their lead from President Putin who some time ago observed that Russia and China are “close allies” that have reached consensus on all-important issues.⁶⁸ Moreover they appear to acknowledge that the “peace process” regarding Korea is driven by the bilateral DPRK–U.S. negotiations and that they accept that this is the way thing will work out. Indeed, Moscow has long since learned that North Korea wants only to talk to the United States and its efforts to mediate or organize this negotiation fell flat as have more recent offers in 2018 to mediate between the parties.⁶⁹ In fact, at one point, Foreign Minister Lavrov argued that nobody has “sustainable channels of influence upon North Korea.⁷⁰ And there is equally good reason to believe that despite China’s economic predominance in North Korea that its leverage over North Korea until 2018 left much to be desired.⁷¹

Indeed, Russia, China, and Japan all share and occasionally unintentionally have displayed their apprehensions that the negotiations to denuclearize North Korea could sideline or marginalize them.⁷² At one point in 2018 China openly inveighed against this possibility claiming that it is indispensable to any peace process there.⁷³ China and Russia each have different ways of trying to forestall this possibility. Therefore their efforts to ensure that their equities, however differing, are respected in any Korean “peace process” are clearly a major motive behind their support for North Korea’s negotiating position that demands genuine progress on a peace treaty and security guarantees as a precondition for denuclearization. Thus China has used its formal standing as a belligerent during the Korean War, its great economic leverage that could be deployed by manipulating the level of its adhesion to the sanctions regime, and its military–political weight to remind North Korea of its “indispensability.”

To the degree that Pyongyang seeks an end or at least a reduction in sanctions, support for its negotiating position, a concurrent desire to remind the United States that it has other alternatives, and a desire to obtain Chinese largesse from the Belt and Road Initiative, it has sought to coordinate its positions with Beijing through the four summits that have been held in China through early 2019.⁷⁴ These summits also enable China to claim, if it wants to, that if Washington wants peace and no nuclear weapons in Korea it must go through China. Then China can use that as leverage in the difficult trade negotiations currently occurring between Beijing and Washington.⁷⁵ Yet we should not blindly assume that Beijing is calling North Korea’s shots in the negotiations with Washington. Pyongyang is adroitly capitalizing on China’s desire to look indispensable—if China were indispensable it would not have to claim that it is—

and China's long-standing unwillingness to push North Korea too hard lest it collapse or look to other powers. Thus it is Beijing and Moscow who are supporting Pyongyang, not the other way around.

Despite the fact that as of January 2019 Kim Jong Un has held four summits with China, there is good reason to believe that the conventional wisdom about China's ability to influence North Korea is inadequate or incomplete. Undoubtedly Beijing has considerable means of economic leverage upon Pyongyang. But it has never been willing to use its full leverage beyond reaching registering its unhappiness with the DPRK's behavior. Furthermore, while North Korea clearly wants to retain China's good will and coordinate with it, Kim Jong Un before 2018 showed no hesitation in brutally challenging Chinese interests and factions within North Korea. Thus he murdered his uncle and his half-brother who had been under Chinese protection to eliminate any channel of Chinese influence over his government. Moreover, the reports emanating from the last summit confirm that China still fears being sidelined.⁷⁶ Therefore continuing Sino-Russian support for North Korea means that they have no choice but to be content to let North Korea deal directly with Washington as long as their equities—which in China's case as a belligerent during the Korean war are greater—are respected. Or, in other words, they fear marginalization but the advent of a direct U.S.–DPRK dialogue has allowed for those two parties to supersede or override their fears of being sidelined and prevents them from blocking this dialogue.

Russia's dilemma about marginalization goes deeper and it has fewer means to deal with it. Russia's primary vital interests in Korea are peace and inclusion. Those interests are equally critical in importance and linked because if Russia is excluded from a Korean peace process it cannot guarantee that either its interests will be safeguarded or that it has any leverage over other actors concerning questions of war and peace. This has long been clear to Moscow and that prospect visibly alarms it.⁷⁷ Moreover, if Russia is marginalized in regard to Korean issues, that outcome undermines any pretension to being a great Asian power. Inclusion in any Korean process is important in its own right but also a part of that larger objective of great power status in Asia. That great power status in Asia has become steadily more important for President Putin's government. Indeed, Putin's first initiative in Asia to regain Russia's position was a trip to Pyongyang in 2000 to reestablish Russian standing as a valuable interlocutor for North Korea. Putin already understood then that if Russia is excluded from the Korean dialogue and cannot influence North Korea, it counts for little or nothing in Asia.

Indeed, the issue of Russia's ability or lack thereof to influence decisions that reckon with its interests and reduce the likelihood of violence relate very strongly to its other obsession, namely its great power status in both Asia and globally. Indeed, obtaining an acknowledgement of that status is a principal goal of all of its Asian policies as is securing foreign investment to help develop Asiatic Russia. Therefore, it is equally critical to Moscow that Russia be heard, seen, and acknowledged by everyone as an equal player in the Six-Party process regardless of facts on the ground. In pursuit of that goal a principal tactic of Russian foreign policy has been to try to persuade North and South Korea and the United States that Moscow is a principal player in regard to this

issue and that it can offer positive steps to any or all of these states because it supposedly has real cards to play regarding Korea, namely its energy supplies, location, and legacy of ties with Pyongyang.

Any Korean war not only threatens Russian material and political interests in Asia, it also threatens the regime at home since the illusion of great power status has become the main domestic prop of a regime mired in domestic stagnation. Since a war or marginalization would show that Russia actually lacks leverage on the parties, it could start a political avalanche at home. Luke Chambers and Vitaly Kozyrev separately observed in 2010 that the president's conduct of foreign policy is a critical aspect of the restoration of both the state and Russia's great power standing abroad, the two key objectives of Putin's policies throughout his tenure in office. Thus actions assessing Russia as an independent, sovereign great power evoke strong public support.⁷⁸ Furthermore, as Vitaly Kozyrev observes,

Many decisions concerning security issues are related to the factor of *legitimacy of the ruling elite*, rather than the correlation between Russia's power and capabilities. Being unable to secure required conditions for a qualitative breakthrough toward an effective economic model and relying increasingly on natural resources for economic growth, the governing groups constantly feel a danger of social unrest and the pressure from competing influential political and business circles.⁷⁹

In other words, Russia's Korea policy is integral to its entire "Ostpolitik" or Asia policy and cannot be understood apart from it.

Peace is equally essential for Russia. Korea has engaged vital Russian interests since the first of the four wars Russia fought over Korea in the twentieth century.⁸⁰ If war breaks out in or over Korea it will likely force Russia, most likely against its preferences, to take sides and possibly become involved in a war where it has no control over any of the protagonists' actions or leverage upon their behavior.⁸¹ It then would be dragged into a conflict that began without reference to its interests and that other governments started for reasons having little relevance to Moscow. Moreover, a war in or over Korea is highly detrimental if not disastrous to its major Asian policies. This war will terminate any opportunity to enlist Asian or international help to rebuild Siberia and the Russian Far East (RFE) while possibly drawing those territories and thus Russia into the war. If those lands cannot be developed then the "pivot to Asia" that has characterized much of Russian policy will be destroyed for its premise and priority goal are that Russia can attract foreign investment to help develop Siberia and the RFE. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that Russia is visibly included among the parties who guarantee the peace and the subsequent restructuring of Northeast Asian, if not international security.

However, because Russia has failed to develop its own Asian capabilities sufficiently and recklessly precipitated what amounts to a war with the West in Ukraine, Russia's overall Asian policies are increasingly also driven by a perfervid anti-Americanism that is, if anything, growing.⁸² So beyond increasing alignment with China on many international issues and striving to persuade North Korea of its importance to the North Korean government and despite its proclaimed opposition to nuclearization, Russia

will not do much to arrest or stop that nuclearization because doing so would signify support for the Trump Administration's policies. Indeed, it has continued to identify with China's approach that blames the United States, seeks to mitigate North Korean behavior, and finds excuses for it by referring to the U.S. threat.⁸³ Furthermore, despite praising President Trump's approach, Putin, once again, has stated that Washington must stop pressuring North Korea to disarm without offering it encouragement, respond to its positive actions, and give North Korea security guarantees in advance of any denuclearization, a long-standing Russian policy and also a non-starter from Washington's standpoint.⁸⁴

This fundamental lack of leverage upon North Korea directly threatens both states' determination to be seen as a major player in anything that occurs on the Korean peninsula. Paradoxically this also drives them to support North Korea's position. China apparently continues to maintain that no matter what North Korea is a strategic buffer between it and the United States and/or its alliance system in Asia.⁸⁵ It would appear that from Beijing's perspective any turn to the West, not to mention unification, undermines that buffer and strengthens the U.S. alliance network particularly in a sensitive area on its border.

For its part, Moscow has all along insisted that its voice must be heard in any resolution of the Korean "knot" and therefore has consistently argued for a resumption of the Six-Party process even if now a bilateral DPRK-U.S. dialogue will take the lead in Korean issues.⁸⁶ In this context, we should not be surprised that Russian analysts argue that because China is the leading trading partner of both Korean states it wants to maintain balanced relations with both those governments, does not want, under any circumstances to lose an ally on its border, or to create a precedent that could negatively affect its claims on Taiwan.⁸⁷ Therefore,

Russian experts thus see a continuation of the policy aimed at preserving the current *status quo* on the Korean peninsula and settling the nuclear issue through negotiation in a renewed Six-Party format to be the most likely scenario for the development of China's relations with both North and South. Russia supports China's position and calls upon all interested parties to consider carefully the approach to this problem proposed by Beijing.⁸⁸

However, having previously upset these Sino-Russian calculations, North Korea and the United States are now driving the process along with South Korean efforts to mediate between them. And it is clear that by meeting with President Trump that Kim Jong Un has substantially enlarged his room for maneuver. The summits between him and Xi Jinping represent not only North Korea's recognition of the need to pay attention to China but also China's efforts to prove its indispensability by supporting North Korea's negotiating position. Precisely because North Korea insists on dealing exclusively with the United States and has proven that it can do so without third-party mediation by Beijing or Moscow, all their efforts to obtain that role have gone for naught and they have had to settle for being in the shadows. In fact, Moscow is even more in the shadows than Beijing as can be seen by the fact that Kim Jong Un has yet to meet even once with

Vladimir Putin. This certainly irks Russian analysts who would prefer a larger Russian role.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, Moscow has accepted a back seat to China in regard to Korea and thus plays second fiddle in this orchestra.⁹⁰

Thus the bilateral fear of marginalization in these talks also drives Russia and China together. For Russia marginalization has been an abiding potential negative outcome that would undermine its Korean and overall Asian policy project.⁹¹ The same clearly holds true for China.⁹² But they still insist upon being participants in any subsequent multilateral process to ensure the durability and viability of any agreements arising out of these bilateral negotiations. Therefore they both continue to maintain that there should be a final Six-Party process to bless any solution that might come out of the two sets of bilateral negotiations, i.e. the inter-Korean dialogue and the Pyongyang-Washington negotiation channel.⁹³ While Moscow's inability to compete economically with China for influence on both Koreas also contributes to its status as playing "second fiddle" here; it is doubtful if Chinese officials or experts, who have apparently less reason to fear marginalization than Russia does even if they still do so, view matters so complacently or resignedly.⁹⁴

Nevertheless Russia has visibly been sidelined even as it desperately and rather pathetically runs after Kim Jong Un to show everyone that he regards Russia as an important player here. The unseemly pursuit of a summit mainly to regain status (an obsession in Russian policymaking) demonstrates this process, as does the cold, hard fact of no summits with Putin. No truer or more wounding evidence of Russia's growing marginality to the current process highlights this forlorn Russian quest for status as regards to Korea.

And this has happened despite the fact that from 2014-mid 2018 Russia arguably was the most important supporter of North Korea and certainly was closer to Pyongyang than was Beijing.⁹⁵ This rapprochement, however, as Lavrov ultimately admitted, was largely confined to the economic spheres, not political influence.⁹⁶ Russia hoped and still hopes to use economic levers of trade, potential energy, rail, and electricity projects to gain a voice in both Pyongyang and Seoul inasmuch as Putin has always understood that without a voice in North Korea Russia would not be deemed a player on the overall Korean peninsula or in Asia.⁹⁷ Yet at the same time Moscow knows it cannot possess any real levers of influence over North Korean decision-making. Neither can it supplant China's role in the North Korean economy or its influence upon the government despite the many humiliations to which Kim Jong Un subjected China.

Moreover, despite publicly arguing for a non-nuclear Korea, Russian officials and analysts, in fact, like the status quo as long as it shows no signs of exploding into real war.⁹⁸ And the same is true for Beijing.⁹⁹ In fact they both argue that there are no concessions that Washington can offer Pyongyang that would give it confidence enough in American intentions to denuclearize. Therefore that denuclearization process should take years throughout which period North Korea would retain its nuclear weapons, a clear non-starter for the United States.¹⁰⁰ Similarly Russia has often joined with the UN to support sanctions on North Korea knowing that only one percent of Russo-North Korean trade is actually affected by sanctions.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, as noted above, there is

good reason to believe that China has long been covertly supplying North Korea with armaments, despite sanctions.¹⁰² In any case Moscow and Beijing have systematically been violating sanctions, notably with respect to energy products.¹⁰³ And since the Singapore summit neither Beijing nor Moscow will support new sanctions and are eagerly undermining existing ones.¹⁰⁴

This situation shows that while there is some competition for influence upon North Korea between Russia and China, at the same time China has clearly won in this rivalry. The rivalry allows North Korea to continue its habitual policy of playing the two off against each other even as it solicits their support for its negotiating position. But what most benefits the DPRK is that in fact it is now driving the negotiation train thanks to President Trump and President Moon's decision to engage Kim Jong Un directly and forcing China and Russia to support its position if they are to realize any of their key political and economic interests, not to mention strategic ones. The current situation where they both support Kim's negotiating position and have accepted his insistence on conducting bilateral negotiations with the United States as a precondition for any progress on the peninsula regarding both a peace regime and denuclearization is a welcome reversal for Pyongyang of its perceived situation since the end of the Korean War.

North Korea's wariness if not deep suspicion of both Moscow and Beijing is longstanding. Indeed, arguably one reason it built the bomb is its apprehension that either or both of those powers would abandon it to the United States as it believes occurred in the 1990s with Russia or that China would be too overbearing and influential in Pyongyang as Kim Jong Un undoubtedly perceived after coming to power in 2011.¹⁰⁵ But for all their plenitude of power they have had to realize the limits of that power in dealing with North Korea and to achieve their overriding goals of displacing or supplanting the U.S.–Asian alliance system or even the intermediary goal of demonstrating their indispensability as great powers to any Asian strategic changes. Thus regional dynamics in Korea along with the larger global dynamics of China and Russia's break with the United States' normative posture and its supposedly hegemonic designs upon them (and refusal to take them as seriously as they wish to be valued) have helped foster the alliance we see today.

Conclusion

Paradoxically the relationships outlined here offer the United States an opportunity to negotiate a lasting security situation with Pyongyang if it takes regional security dynamics into account and accords them a priority equal to that of denuclearization. Fostering North Korean independence to the greatest possible degree by taking into account North Korea's need for security offers the United States the tangible possibility of reshaping regional dynamics to its advantage. This requires a much more and coherent negotiation process than what we now see. But a failure to see that the possibility how exists for bringing about both a pathway to inter-Korean peace and denuclearization

through the bilateral negotiations between Seoul and Pyongyang on the one hand and Washington and Pyongyang on the other will likely cause a reversion towards the bipolarity that is always there lurking in the wings.

Undoubtedly Moscow and Beijing are driven very much by anti-Americanism and their aspirations for influence over both Koreas and would, if they could, thwart any serious denuclearization or progress towards peace while trying to prevent the outbreak of a hot war. But thwarting the current negotiations by freezing the status quo can only produce situations that will lead to repeated and dangerous crises if not a new war. For the moment Moscow and Beijing have no choice but to support the current negotiations if they want any influence over Pyongyang. This gives Washington the golden opportunity to reduce that influence and craft a solution in Korea that benefits all involved. Such solutions have been published and are on the table, so to speak, for inspection. Indeed, the dynamics of the Russo–Chinese alliance, much to the likely chagrin of those governments, has created the conditions allowing for this reshaping to occur. We can only hope that the United States will seize the opportunity before it and lead Northeast Asia out of its dead end for otherwise a return to the status quo ante is all but ensured. And who benefits from that?

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